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Oral history interview with Wolf Kahn, 1977
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Wolf Kahn on November 20, 1977, and January 16, 1978. The interview took place in New York City, and was conducted by Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The sound quality for this interview is poor throughout, leading to an abnormally high number of inaudible sections. The Archives of American Art has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. 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

PAUL CUMMINGS: I think it's on. It's the 20th of November 1977, Paul Cummings talking to Wolf Kahn in his studio, 813 Broadway, where you've been for 20 years?

WOLF KAHN: Twenty-seven years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Twenty-seven years, now?

WOLF KAHN: Twenty—twenty-six. Twenty-six. I'm a beacon of stability in a world of change.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] At least you don't have to worry about where you're going to go.

WOLF KAHN: Yes, I'm worried about it all the time. I mean, you know, I've been—at least 10 times, I've been threatened to be thrown out.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

WOLF KAHN: In fact, some of my—I mean, I've constantly stayed, and the people that I shared with the studio with have constantly been thrown out. One of them by attacking the landlord, you know, and—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —[they laugh] exotic things like that [ph]?

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. And then I had Bob De Niro here, who listened to a Billie Holiday record, the same record that—the last one she did before she died, which was all, you know—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: —down, heavy, you know. And—and he just kept it going all night long, the same record. Finally, I threw him out.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Too much.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Anyway, why don't we start at the beginning and do some, kind of, family background, and ideas, and history. You were born in Stuttgart, right?

WOLF KAHN: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: 1927, October four, and you just had a birthday.

WOLF KAHN: Yes. Fiftieth birthday. We'll call this the 50th birthday interview.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Good. And you grew up there until 1939, when you went to Britain.

WOLF KAHN: No, I lived—I lived in Frankfurt most of my—most of my [inaudible].

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, you did?

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh.

WOLF KAHN: I lived with my grandmother, because my father emigrated very soon after. He was the conductor of the Stuttgart Philharmonic, and lost his job the day Hitler took power, for being Jewish.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see. So you started out of all that.

WOLF KAHN: Oh, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: Oh, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And he left—

WOLF KAHN: He left immediately and went—he conducted for a while for the Pope in Rome for recording purposes. [00:02:06] Then he conducted for—uh, he did the Havana Symphony in Cuba, but he didn't like the climate, and he finally ended up in the U.S.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, so you had somebody to come to, then [inaudible].

WOLF KAHN: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. He got here, I think, in 1935. I didn't get here until 1940.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, how did—you grew up then with, what, your grandparents?

WOLF KAHN: My grandmother in Frankfurt. And she was a wealthy lady, grande dame. I led a very sheltered childhood, or as sheltered as you could be when you were afraid to get out on the street, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm. Well, what was that like as a child growing up in the '30s in—

WOLF KAHN: —in Hitler Germany?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: It wasn't very pleasant. I mean, I had a very pleasant childhood, anyway, but it was not because of it but in spite of conditions.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You had more rules, don't, than—

WOLF KAHN: Well, you know, you had to be careful about going into certain stores, because they—they'd treat you nasty, and certain—uh, like movies, after a certain—I think after 1938. They had signs, "Jews are not allowed," and so forth. You know, I mean, it was all—on certain days, you just didn't show up on the street, because all the gentile children had Hitler Youth uniforms on, so it was all too easy to see who the Jewish kids were.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

WOLF KAHN: And they were up for grabs. Anybody could beat them up, you know? In fact, people felt very self-righteous about it. I was beaten up by a bunch of grownups, my bicycle broken, on the way to school one day.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative]. Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: I mean, it was a very strange period in history.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So a strange, terrifying experience.

WOLF KAHN: Well, it wasn't very pleasant, but as soon as I was home, I was surrounded by luxury and comfort, and harmony, most of the time. [00:04:00] You know? In fact, there was a—when I was 11, there was a period after the famous Kristallnacht, where all the synagogues were burned. Things like that happened. And there was a period, uh, uh, when the Jewish school that I attended, perforce, was closed, because all the teachers had been taken to concentration camps for so-called "protective custody."

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And my friend Hans Eberstadt [ph] and I were just terribly pleased, because it meant that we could play at lead soldiers for—for an uninterrupted period of two months, you know, three months. So we set up these—these—these huge battles on my grandmother's big sewing table, which lasted for weeks on end, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And uh, uh, we just couldn't get out on the street. That's all, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So you just stayed home.

WOLF KAHN: Stayed home. We thought it was a lark, you know, no school.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Then it was less of a lark when we finally got back to school. We saw all the old teachers, or the ones that survived, and their black hair had turned white, and things like that, and you'd see that everybody had gone through something rather sinister.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And nobody would talk about it. You know, not a word was spoken.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I mean, to the children.

WOLF KAHN: To the children.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: The grownups in those days had—maybe this—this—this is no longer possible, but the grownups in those days had a feeling that there was such a thing as a child's world and an adult world.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And the two should be kept separate, so that even though the adult world—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, in Germany, wasn't it [ph]?

WOLF KAHN: —intruded all too much into the child's world—I think that happened in—in—that was, I imagine—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —Victorian, 19th century.

WOLF KAHN: It happened in the bourgeoisie in Europe all over.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: I don't think it was particularly German. You know, and probably in England, too.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Uh, and certain things children were not supposed to understand. [00:06:01] In fact, they didn't, and still don't, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [Laughs.]

WOLF KAHN: Such as the breakup of—of parents, and so forth, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: And all was hidden from them for their own—for their own good, so to speak.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, yeah, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: And so my—even though we had fugitives in our apartment, like my cousin came in all—all pale from—from Cologne, because he's being hunted by the Gestapo. We put him up in the—in the upstairs attic, you know, hid him. Um, um, when I—I asked why, my grandmother was—was—was very loathe to tell me why, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], really?

WOLF KAHN: Because this was the adult world, [laughs] and the children—the child shouldn't know. He shouldn't know. He shouldn't—certain things he shouldn't know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Of course, it was silly, because it was all around. Of course you knew, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But what—you lived in a house then, or was it an apartment?

WOLF KAHN: We lived in an apartment in—in a solid middle-class neighborhood in Frankfurt. My grandmother was the widow of a banker.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: She had lots of money. Which slowly, of course, disappeared, by confiscation, mostly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really? Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: And she ended up being killed in Theresienstadt, along with, uh, a lot of others.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: My other grandparents, too. You know, because they—somehow nobody really felt it was absolutely crucial to leave. They—they knew that the young people had to leave, because there was no future in Germany.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: The old people, they, sort of, let it all creep up on them. They were in no hurry to leave. You know, that was their city, that they—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —they lived there, they knew people—

WOLF KAHN: —they lived there, they had money, they had positions still, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: We had a maid until the very end, a gentile maid.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: A strange period.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah. [00:08:00] Do you think that's informed your thinking, ever, about your art, or [inaudible]?

WOLF KAHN: I'm sure—I'm sure one of—one of the things that—that it's done to me or for me, I'm not sure which. Uh, it's made me into a rather, um, um, slow to change person. You know? I've had all the change I've wanted in my life, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Right away to start with.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, right away to start with. You know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: And—and—and people who are ready to—to throw up the present for the future, I have no sympathy for, because I know the future isn't going to be any better. [Paul Cummings laughs.] It's likely to be worse, you know. So I figure, we'll—it behooves me to—to look at what's around, and—and to—to, um, to treasure those things which I've found useful and—and beautiful.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You know? Same thing with friends. I've—I've—I never give up any friends, even if they sometimes behave badly. I find excuses for them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: I've never, um—I've been—I'm one of the few people I know who's had a perfectly successful marriage.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: I don't—I told my wife the other day, I intend to grow old with her, you know? [Paul Cummings laughs.] In fact, I already have. [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: I'm just [inaudible], please. There are those of us who [inaudible].

WOLF KAHN: And also, I think the, um, you know, this idea of being a landscape painter might have something to do with it, because after all, landscape is something that might be searching for roots [inaudible]. I've said that elsewhere.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative]. Kind of a close grab onto nature, which is better.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, nature, which is unchanging, which, you know, which gives you solidity.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of schools did you go to?

WOLF KAHN: Well, I went—before I left high school, I attended 15 different schools. [00:10:00]

PAUL CUMMINGS: In Frankfurt?

WOLF KAHN: No, no. In Frankfurt, I only attended seven.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So every year, you were in another one.

WOLF KAHN: Well, just about. We were hounded, sort of, from—from one school to another. And then I went to England, and in England I went to two schools.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And then I went to America, and my father was—was on the move. He lived first in, uh, the suburbs and then moved to the city. So—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative]. But, now, you know, what kind of schools did you go to in—in, uh—

WOLF KAHN: —in Germany?

PAUL CUMMINGS: In Germany.

WOLF KAHN: I went to very good schools. I went to the, um—first, I went to the *Volksschule*, which is the German elementary school, which was a decent school. And then we couldn't—the Jewish kids were separated and given a Jewish teacher, but still within the confines of the *Volksschule*. Then as—as we were beaten up too much in—in the yard, you know, by the gentile kids, by Nazi kids—

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you mean you'd go to the same building.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You'd just be put in that room.

WOLF KAHN: Right, right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, all right [ph].

WOLF KAHN: Then—then it was—was thought better for our sakes to—to—to put us, um, uh, into the Jewish—there was a very old and very prestigious school in Frankfurt called the Philanthropin, which is a *Gymnasium*, in which—which was kept by the Jewish community. And it was an excellent school. And of course, since—since the, um, uh, teachers who'd worked for the state no longer had—had positions, they all—the only place they could teach is in the Jewish school.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was there.

WOLF KAHN: So we had professors from the universities teaching us history—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, right.

WOLF KAHN: —and philosophy, and all.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Because they'd been thrown out of them.

WOLF KAHN: You know, really good teaching.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: It's the only place where they could have a job.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How many of the students, though, were involved with the Hitler Youth business? Were there many, or few?

WOLF KAHN: The German students?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: All of them. [00:12:00]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

WOLF KAHN: You had to. Everybody.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see.

WOLF KAHN: Everybody. It's the Jewish students who weren't allowed to be. In fact, like—like my feeling toward the whole Nazi business was—was feeling terribly left out. I cried tears that I couldn't be a Hitler Youth, you know? [Paul Cummings laughs.] I saw a parade going down, you know—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: —with the massed standards of—and all German kids are little militarists anyway, or were in those days. Hopefully they're not anymore, but I doubt it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: But in those days, we all played with soldiers, and we, you know, just loved everything having to do with the military, including the Jewish kids. Because, after all, we grew up in this German ethos.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You know? That wasn't—there wasn't any separate Jewish ethos that we grew up in, but it was, sort of, forced upon us as we got older.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really? I mean, it wasn't—

WOLF KAHN: But all our families were assimilated families.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Especially in Frankfurt. And the religious Jews were mostly the Jews from the east who'd settled in Frankfurt, and they were riff-raff.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: I mean, the German Jews looked down on them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, the *Hochdeutsch* business.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, it was very—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why is that? I mean, it's like in New York, if you belong to the Harmony Club, it's better than if you belong to the [inaudible] Club.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. It's strange that that's still—that's still—that still exists.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's very strong.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, and—and, well, it's because the German Jews, earlier, belonged to the general culture.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You know? The eastern Jews kept—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —stayed together?

WOLF KAHN: Stayed together, and kept—kept their individual culture, the Jewish culture. But they had their own language. They didn't participate in the general Western culture, which—and of course, now I look—look at people who grew up within the Jewish culture, and I envy them terribly. [Paul Cummings laughs.] You know, I'm [inaudible] Meyer Schapiro. [00:14:00] I love to talk with him about Jewish culture, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Once I met Meyer and Barney Newman, and we all went to Franz Kline's funeral—and it was a very shameful performance, that funeral, because you could see that all the people got up to speak, uh, um—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —for their own [inaudible].

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, yeah, were trying to prove what great friends of Franz's they were. And actually, the lady who had taken care of Franz in his declining days and so forth wasn't even there, because of some kind of, um, envy, spite.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Some kind of thing. Anyway, the—all the vibes from that funeral were wrong.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I know, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Um, and, um—

PAUL CUMMINGS: I remember people—a lot of people talking about that [inaudible].

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. Barney and Meyer went out, and they—they said—we asked, "Well, how come such-and-such wasn't allowed to speak, who was, like, Franz's greatest friend?" And Meyer said to Barney, "I guess he doesn't have enough *yichus*." So this is a word I had never heard before. You know, in Germany, words like that don't exist among German Jews.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: They—they might know what *meshuga* means, or something like that, but *yichus*, that's already too complex. And then they went into this long disquisition about what *yichus* is. And I was fascinated, you know? It was a whole—whole very interesting culture.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So you grew up with German. I mean, no Hebrew, or Yiddish, or any of that.

WOLF KAHN: No. I learned Hebrew in—in the, um, in the Philanthropin.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. But I forgot it all, of course. I'd probably pick it up quite quickly if I wanted to.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you know, living in—in a nice house with a lot of music interest, obviously—

WOLF KAHN: Also art. Also art.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Art? Well, what—what—

WOLF KAHN: Yes, I had art lessons. For example, you know, I—I always drew.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: I—I—from the time I was five years old, I was known as a prodigy of drawing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You know? [00:16:00] Uh, when I was five, I drew the emperor Haile Selassie with his whole family,

including the guy who carries the umbrella, and so forth.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, right, right.

WOLF KAHN: Because it was the Abyssinian War.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: You know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: And these came out of newspapers [inaudible].

WOLF KAHN: Right, right. And they were even selling, uh, soldiers in the—in the—toy soldiers, you know, of the emperor of Abyssinia and all this. I mean, it was very much in the—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —in the air.

WOLF KAHN: In the air. I—I drew that, and I drew orchestras. I loved to draw musicians, I suppose because of my father.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You know, conductors and so forth. And I was very proud that I knew, for example, how the French horn was held, and I could draw that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, right, right.

WOLF KAHN: You know, as against the tuba, which was wrapped around somebody's stomach. And I could—I could draw—draw all those things when I was five years old. And I mean, I conscientiously [*sic*] used to go to the promenade concerts in the botanical gardens in Frankfurt, in order to—to draw how these people carried their instruments.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You know, I had a hell of a time with the violin, because—because the bow arm, and the—even know, it's complicated to draw, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But was it—was this encouraged, or did they [cross talk]?

WOLF KAHN: And they encouraged it. Oh, my grandmother thought—she was—she thought it was marvelous. And, uh, by the time I was nine, I was given private lessons.

PAUL CUMMINGS: By whom?

WOLF KAHN: By a lady named Fräulein von Jöden [ph]. She was an aristocratic lady who, uh, who was a paintress.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And, um, um, gave private lessons to a few select students.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. What did she have you do?

WOLF KAHN: Well, um, she set up a bowl of peaches, and I—I painted the peaches in oil.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And then she taught me how to paint the fuzz on the peaches, you know. You mix up a little bit of white with the—with the, um, uh, the glazing medium, and you, you know, run it over the peaches that you've painted when they're dry, and you've got the fuzz, you see? [00:18:12]

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] So you started oil paint very early.

WOLF KAHN: Oh, I—I did [inaudible]—she taught me how to do—how to bind a book. I can show it to you afterwards. I still have it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Inaudible.]

WOLF KAHN: It was kept by my grandmother before she went off to a concentration camp, gave it to her maid to keep for me until after the war. And I got all these things after the war.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You're kidding.

WOLF KAHN: It's really—it's really—

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's amazing.

WOLF KAHN: —quite astonishing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, how did she find you, or you find her, then? I mean, the maid?

WOLF KAHN: I don't quite remember how that went. I think my brother, who was in the army in Germany, looked her up. And then she said, "Oh, incidentally, I have this—all these drawings that Wolf made." My brother brought them back.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How fantastic [ph]. Now, did he leave Germany with you, or before you?

WOLF KAHN: No, he left earlier, because he was older, you see. He could take a job.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh. What's his name, then?

WOLF KAHN: Peter Kahn.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And he's a painter also.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: But he teaches at Cornell.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did both of you become painters? That's, kind of, unusual.

WOLF KAHN: Well—my mother was very talented as a painter, also—as a—you know, and drawing. She must have been quite an astonishing woman in general, although she died when I was very small, and I never really knew her.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: And also my—my father's uncle was a painter.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: He was a—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who was—who was he?

WOLF KAHN: His name was Max Kahn. And he even won a prize in the Salon in Paris.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: But he was very wealthy in the—and, you know, in these German, uh, upper bourgeois families, it was, sort of, like, that as long as the business would—could be carried on by the oldest, then the next oldest could follow an intellectual pursuit. [00:20:03]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right.

WOLF KAHN: You see? And Uncle Max wanted to be a painter, and [inaudible] his brother was—carried on the bank.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: So he was allowed to do as he wanted. He was encouraged to, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: To carry on [ph]. Well, did you read much as a child?

WOLF KAHN: Oh, tremendous, tremendous. Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah? What kind of books were available? What was [inaudible]?

WOLF KAHN: I was a serious little kid. I read, uh, the history of Frederick the Great, illustrated by Menzel.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And I used to—of course, that was a great inspiration, too, because here were all these soldiers [cross talk].

PAUL CUMMINGS: Absolutely.

WOLF KAHN: And Frederick.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Frederick the *Grosse*, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, Friedrich *der Grosse*. And those drawings were really good.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Menzel is marvelous. Adolph von Menzel. Do you know—do you know his work?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: He was a marvelous illustrator.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He was from Munich or something, wasn't he? Or [inaudible]?

WOLF KAHN: I don't know if he was or not. He was an Impressionist painter, also.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Not even all that bad.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: And I read Greek myths, and I read, uh—and I would skim [ph]—I remember every time I was ill, my aunt, who was also a great lady with a huge library, used to come and bring me [Hermann] Knackfuss's book. Knackfuss made *Kunstler-monographien*, which is monographs of artists.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And I would get, um, Rubens, Velazquez. Each time I was ill, I got another artist.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] What a way to build a library.

WOLF KAHN: I had a good art library when I was a kid.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: And some of those books I still have.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

WOLF KAHN: I brought them over.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Great, great.

WOLF KAHN: Yep.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you know why they decided to get you out at that time and not earlier, say?

WOLF KAHN: Well, at that time—now, I left two weeks before the war began.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: By that, I was, like, one of the last children's transports that left. By that time, everybody knew that things were about to bust loose, and you'd better get the hell out of there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: And, uh, the British, in 1939, to their eternal credit, passed a law whereby German refugee children could enter the country, as long as an English family was found that would sign an affidavit that these children would never become charges of the state. [00:22:17]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right.

WOLF KAHN: And, um, um, I had a cousin. My aunt, by that time, was in London. I had a cousin who was a student at Cambridge, and he talked around, and he found a—a professor at Cambridge University—University of Cambridge—Cambridge University—who took me in.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So you [inaudible].

WOLF KAHN: And so I left. I—I went—I came to England in July of 1939, and the war broke out on August first, I think. [Inaudible.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: You just made it.

WOLF KAHN: I just made it. With a number around my neck, you know, so that they could recognize who I was.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Wondering [ph]. [Laughs.]

WOLF KAHN: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what was that like, I mean, to—to leave where—

WOLF KAHN: It was terrible.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —you'd grown up to go to—

WOLF KAHN: It was terrible. It was terrible.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —different languages, and country, and the whole [inaudible].

WOLF KAHN: Well, and language was no problem, because I'd had a British governess, and I was bilingual.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, you had?

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. Um, but, um, the thing that was—made it hard, first of all, was to—for the first time, I was really on my own, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Had you traveled anywhere before [inaudible]?

WOLF KAHN: Yes, I'd gone to—I'd gone to, uh, a children's colony, you know, in the summertime, and so forth, so I wasn't completely scared to leave home or something like that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Um, but, uh, what was scary about it was the fact I didn't know these people.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And in fact, as soon as they saw me, I could see they were very unfriendly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

WOLF KAHN: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And were they, in fact?

WOLF KAHN: Oh, yes. They were, in fact, because this Professor Wade [ph], um, um, thought he was doing a very humanitarian thing, and in fact, he was. He was saving my life.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [00:24:00]

WOLF KAHN: But he wanted to—to have a real refugee, you know, with rickets, and dark under the eyes, and stuff.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

WOLF KAHN: Here was this fat little kid who'd just come from a very, very well-to-do household, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So he couldn't really save you. [Laughs.]

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, he couldn't do anything with me. I spoke English already. [Paul Cummings laughs.] I was—you know, there was nothing he could do with me—for me, you see. And he felt—and also my arrival had been, um, um, anticipated by the arrival of a bicycle and a huge steamer trunk.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Oh, dear.

WOLF KAHN: And so as soon as he saw those things, he felt that his dreams were evaporating in smoke.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was even worse. [Laughs.]

WOLF KAHN: Yes, yes. So then when—when I came, he said, "Now, I want to see you in my study."

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And he invited me down to the study.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: The very first day I was there. And he said, "I see that I'm the victim of a fraud."

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Did he really?

WOLF KAHN: Yes. And, um, uh, "Your family could very well have kept you, or found some other kind—some other means of—of—of, uh, dealing with you. Um, and the only way I know how to protect myself is to give you the status of a servant here." You know, this was, like, like, two days out of my grandmother's house. [Paul Cummings laughs.] I'd never—I'd never—I hardly knew how to tie my own shoelaces.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Cross talk.] Put on a—yeah, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: I practically had a [inaudible]. And, uh, uh, so I immediately got—he says, "Now, now, your—your position will be that you will get up at five o'clock in the morning." It was like out of Dickens, you know. [Paul Cummings laughs.] "You'll shine—you'll shine these—the family's shoes. Then you'll go down into the kitchen, and—and—and ask what needs to be done there. After that, I expect you to work for the gardener," and so forth and so on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He had a real regime laid out for you.

WOLF KAHN: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Uh, and then you had to take care of the children, and you had to be a companion to the two younger children, and, um, so on and so forth. [00:26:01] You know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, did that work? I mean, did your really do all [cross talk]?

WOLF KAHN: Well, I did it. I did all I had—I had no choice. There was nowhere else to go, you know? That was my home.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: And, uh, in the meantime, he immediately let the Jewish committee know that he was dissatisfied with his refugee, and he wanted another one, or none at all, but to certainly get rid of this one. [Paul Cummings laughs.] You know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: It must have made—welcome to England, right?

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, yeah. So then they found another family for me, who were, um, lower middle class, whereas he had been upper middle class. And this second family was just as nice, as sweet as can be. The first thing they said to me is, "I want you to call me Mommy and Daddy." And they had a little boy. And I'm still in touch with them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh.

WOLF KAHN: And we're—we're—you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And—and my class bias comes from that, I suppose, you know, [Paul Cummings laughs] because since then, I've always been very dubious about the rich, and much more in favor of [they laugh] people with—the less fortunate. You know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, how did you like going to school in England? Because August is—

WOLF KAHN: Oh, in England it was fine.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —school time.

WOLF KAHN: I started to go to school in the fall, yes, as soon as I went with the Purvises, my second family.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: They put me in the Cambridge and County High School for Boys. I immediately started doing very well, because I'm a good student. I've always been a good student.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And you knew English.

WOLF KAHN: I knew English. I knew English grammar far better than any of the British boys did, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: I immediately became number one boy in English in the class.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] How did they all take to that?

WOLF KAHN: Well, they thought I was a great exotic, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Nobody knew how to pronounce my name. You have to realize, in 1939, there were no foreigners in England.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: It's—England is a very, very isolated country.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: You know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, how did you like it, I mean as far as going to school, and—

WOLF KAHN: Oh, it got to be a great adventure. I loved it. I—you know, as soon as I found a—found a nice home, and—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [00:28:00] But you were only there about a year. I mean, you left in—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —'40.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. Well, a year is a long time. I still remember every day of that year, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah?

WOLF KAHN: Sure.

PAUL CUMMINGS: With all the transitions and everything.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. It was very intense.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did they get you from Germany there? I mean, you'd have to, what, by train across France, or by—

WOLF KAHN: No, through Holland.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Through Holland? Okay.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, and then a boat.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: And it was a—a transport, a children's transport. It was arranged by the Jewish committee, joint distribution committee.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So there were hundreds of children.

WOLF KAHN: Hundreds of children. Yeah. We all had nametags—number tags, rather.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Around our necks. You know, we're—[laughs] uh, you know, just—just herded, sort of.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: A strange Children's Crusade sort of—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —exodus.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. Yeah, there's a lady who—who writes about—uh, Lottie [ph] something or other. I've forgotten—Laura [ph]. Laura something, who wrote a book about that, about going to England as a child.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: But I've forgotten her last name. Laura Blau [ph], I think.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, how did you then get taken from England to the United States?

WOLF KAHN: Well, then—you see, what happens is that, um, in—the reason I couldn't leave the United States and go—I mean, Germany and go directly to the U.S. was because they had the immigration laws, you see?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, right.

WOLF KAHN: And each country—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —had so many people—

WOLF KAHN: —had a quota.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: See, the Germans had 10,000 a year.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: So, like, my number was 60,000 by the time they even got me registered in the consulate. I was 60,000. See? Um, then, uh, once I was in England, they had a different quota, and nobody from England wanted to go to the United States anyway.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see [ph].

WOLF KAHN: You see?

PAUL CUMMINGS: So—

WOLF KAHN: —so I became, uh—I got on the English quota. I could leave whenever the hell I wanted to. You see?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see. [Laughs.]

WOLF KAHN: It's—it's the stupid bureaucratic things that happen. Fortunately, those kind of things don't quite happen like that anymore. [00:30:00] You know, there's a little progress. Like when they had the Hungarian revolutions, they—that whole quota thing I don't think exists anymore.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It still does, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yeah. I mean, if you're a Canadian who wants to live here, it can take you years to get your green card and stuff.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah? Really? Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Well, anyway, uh, with my quota number, I would have left in '46. By that time, I would have been a pile of bones, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative]. That's incredible. So you [inaudible] when you came to—

WOLF KAHN: Then my father was living in Montclair, New Jersey. He had finally gotten, by hook or crook, after many ups and downs—mostly downs—he got himself as a professor of music at Montclair State, a part time job. And everybody had—everybody was working.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: My brothers had jobs. My sister was 18—she was 17. She was a senior in high school, but she kept the whole household.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And I, sort of, helped her.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So you lived in Montclair for—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —a few years.

WOLF KAHN: Mm-hmm [affirmative], for a year.

PAUL CUMMINGS: For a year.

WOLF KAHN: Then we moved to Caldwell, New Jersey. But first, we moved to another house in Montclair, which meant I again had to change schools, and then we moved to Caldwell, which meant I again changed schools.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And then from Caldwell, we moved to New York, where my father immediately called up a Mr. Moskowitz [ph], who was on the board of education, because he wanted to put me into High School of Music & Art, and he thought that influence was needed.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: So he was told that influence would—would avail him naught, but I passed my test with no problem, because I was—

PAUL CUMMINGS: So your influence was the best [ph]. [Laughs.]

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. Right. Virtue triumphed.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Well, how did you decide [ph] Music & Art, because that's a, sort of, freewheeling place on occasion. How was [inaudible]?

WOLF KAHN: Then it [inaudible] freewheeling place. It was rather structured, stiff, you know. [00:32:01] As American high schools go, very, uh, uh, solid.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: But I went to sleep the day I—I got in there, and never woke up until I graduated.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Why?

WOLF KAHN: And, uh—because it was so easy. After European schooling, American schooling, you know, in—on a high school level, it's—it's a laugh.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why—what is—what's the difference?

WOLF KAHN: There's no work. You don't do any work. You know, and I was used to going to school at 7:30 in the morning and getting out in the afternoon at 4:30, in the Philanthropin, and even in the English public school.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You know? And, you know, everybody took three types of math, three foreign languages, uh, um, uh, I think something like nine periods of study a day.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And in high school, you know, I mean, they don't believe, in America, in putting any pressure on kids. For God's sakes, it might warp them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] It might do something.

WOLF KAHN: Psychologically, it might—might ruin them completely, as it undoubtedly did me, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Well, did you have painting classes, drawing classes?

WOLF KAHN: At Music & Art?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, you had three hours of art a day, which is very nice.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And I—I don't think I learned much, but I certainly practiced a lot of things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were there any instructors you remember, or teachers—

WOLF KAHN: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —in high school?

WOLF KAHN: There was a good watercolor teacher who studied with Hans Hofmann.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

WOLF KAHN: Yes, yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who was that [ph]?

WOLF KAHN: And she—her name was, um, uh, Ms. Ridgeway, Helen Ridgeway [ph]. And she was—she had the reputation for being a very good teacher. She was a kind—kind of, a tough old lady, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Uh, very enthusiastic when somebody did something wild, colorful, bright, free.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: And I—I never—I don't think she was ever that—that taken with me, because I wasn't particularly interested in being free. [00:34:04]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm. What were you doing then? I mean, what kind of—

WOLF KAHN: Rendering. Very exact rendering of things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see, just tonal shapes and—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, my—my big hero all through Music & Art was, um, Norman Rockwell.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Except later on, I decided, well, I really didn't want to be an illustrator. I'd much rather be a political cartoonist. So then my big hero became David Low.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

WOLF KAHN: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm. Where did you discover him?

WOLF KAHN: Well, he was all over.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: I—I had first discovered him, of course, in England.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: But he was all over.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm. What—you know, what did your family think of this [cross talk]?

WOLF KAHN: Well, my family, uh, my father was always—took it for granted that, uh, I'd do something in art.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's what you were going to do, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: And, um, later on—and then I did some cartoons, and some—and one of them was published in [inaudible].

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And, uh, my father—at some time when I was at Hofmann, so after, when I was struggling, he said to me—I says, "Oh, I"—I showed him some work, and he couldn't make head or tail out of it. It was abstract, or something like that, or almost abstract. And he says, "Well, hmm, I don't know. I've always thought you were going to be a cartoonist," [they laugh] with great disappointment in his voice. My father knows—doesn't have much feeling for painting, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: He knows very little about it, and he's entirely wrapped up in music.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did he continue doing, then, teaching or—

WOLF KAHN: Well, he continued to teach, and now he has a very interesting position. He's the conductor of the Senior Concert Orchestra, where all retired musicians play from—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where is that?

WOLF KAHN: All over. They play in Carnegie Hall once a year, and—and it's—it's under the auspices of the musicians' union [The Associated Musicians of Greater New York], local 802. [00:36:03]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I didn't know they had anything like that.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, they do.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So they're all, kind of, keeping, uh, busy, and—

WOLF KAHN: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. He's very busy, and he has to be, uh, very, very sensitive politically, because he's got all these people there who—all he has to do is say the wrong thing, and they never show up again, because they don't have to. They're all on pensions.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right.

WOLF KAHN: And so, you know, they play because they love to.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: So it's an interesting job for him. He's 80—just had his 80th—81st birthday. And he's in marvelous shape.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But he must have some incredible people in that orchestra.

WOLF KAHN: Yes, he does. He has one guy who played under Mahler.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You're kidding.

WOLF KAHN: Yep.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] He's got to be over 75.

WOLF KAHN: He's 90, I think. He's got another guy who—who—who shakes so hard that all he has to do is hold his violin, and he gets a natural tremolo. [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's incredible. Anyway, Music & Art. Um, you graduated in, what, '45.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. Right. And went right directly into the Navy.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why the Navy?

WOLF KAHN: Because they had the RT program, where you could get a rating right away if you could pass a test. The Eddy test. I don't know if you remember that. [Phone rings.] Excuse me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh. No. Anyway, you went into the Navy and took this test.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. So—so that meant that you went to school to learn electronics and the new science of radar, and so forth and so on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right.

WOLF KAHN: And that's why I went in the Navy.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So what did you do in the—in the Navy?

WOLF KAHN: Well, I ended up, uh, flunking out of school, because—

PAUL CUMMINGS: [They laugh.] You're kidding.

WOLF KAHN: Yes. Because I'd never had a physics course. I—I only had the lowest kind of math. I just had enough to pass that test.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And I also don't really have a very good mechanical sense, so that finally, when it came to taking radios apart and putting them back together, I didn't do all that well on it. [00:38:06]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Just didn't—yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Um, and the thing that really hurt me, that really made me flunk out in a hurry, was that I took the general classification test in the Navy, that everybody takes, and I got a perfect score on it, which is, like, one in 12,000 gets a perfect score, because I'm an excellent test taker.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Um, and, um, uh, as soon as I'd starting doing badly in these—in these, uh, specialized electronic tests—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: —the Executive Officer hauled me in, in front of his desk, and—and said, "You're a fuck off," you know [Paul Cummings laughs], "because you're—you know, you've got this—this perfect test, one in 12,000, and

you can't pass this measly radio test. What's the matter with you? You're not working. You know, you don't care about it. Out you go."

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: So right at that time, the war was over, anyway.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: This was in late—late—early '46, this—this happened. And, um, so I was put on a detail to make drawings of admirals, so—in the style of [Boris] Artzybasheff, because that was my style at the time, you know, with all the heavy wrinkles and all that stuff?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Uh, because I'd done one of the librarian in the—in the Naval Research Lab, where we—where I was—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —supposed to be working.

WOLF KAHN: —where I flunked out. Yeah, when [ph] I was supposed to be studying. And then he passed it around, and from the librarian, I got passed up to the—to the commanding officer of the lab, and then he showed it to—to some higher up, and then I was, sort of, passed around like a rare vessel, from one admiral to another. [Laughs.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what did you do, run over to their office and make a drawing, or—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —paintings, or—

WOLF KAHN: I made a drawing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: A pencil drawing with all the wrinkles.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah?

WOLF KAHN: Which they then kept. [00:40:00] You know, I mean, [Paul Cummings laughs] it was that—that period—that period in our war effort, you know, where anything went. Things were falling apart.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's incredible. Well, how—how many of those people did you do, do you think?

WOLF KAHN: I imagine I did about 30.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, so it was one right after another.

WOLF KAHN: Well, I was—it—it was over a period of two months, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: But then I got three-day passes in between, you know, and so, I mean, it was a very privileged position.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It wasn't bad.

WOLF KAHN: It wasn't bad at all.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, then what—but you were in for three years, about.

WOLF KAHN: In the Navy? Thirteen months.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, 13 months.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, because I had you in for much longer than that.

WOLF KAHN: No. No, that's all. Because I was 17 when I went in, and I was 18 when I got out. [Laughs.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: I see.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So you got out in, what, '40—

WOLF KAHN: '46, and I went, uh, um—I hadn't really thought about schooling or anything, and so—I didn't expect to get out in such a hurry.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: And then I went to, um—I went to, um, New School after that.

[Tape stops, restarts.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh. Anyway, but you came out of the Navy, and you had [inaudible] GI Bill then.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So you went to—

WOLF KAHN: I went first to The New School and studied with Stuart Davis, and Hans Jelinek, and Hans Siemen [ph]. I took all sorts of courses.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: It was essentially a dilettante period in my life. And, um—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm. What were they like? What was Davis like as a teacher?

WOLF KAHN: Terrible teacher. The worst.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why?

WOLF KAHN: Because he didn't take it seriously. He said—one night, he said, um—he said, um—it was one—once a week we met, you know. And it was, uh, uh—he said—he says, "All right, children. It's 10 o'clock. Let's close the magic portals. We've conjured up enough art atmosphere for one evening."

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Well, he was fairly old by then, wasn't he? Well, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Yes. Yes, he—and he was a lot of fun. I mean, he—he loved to talk about jazz and baseball. If you knew anything about jazz and baseball, you could always get a good conversation out of Stuart Davis. [00:42:02]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: But he wasn't any art teacher.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He wasn't interested.

WOLF KAHN: No, no. Certainly not in that class.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. What about the other instructors?

WOLF KAHN: Well, Jelinek, uh, taught me how to do wood engraving.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And, uh, whom else did I have as an art instructor? Egas, I think.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, Camilo. Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: And he had a model, and—but the nice thing about the New School was, great—great place to pick up girls.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, right.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Still is. [Laughs.]

WOLF KAHN: Well, I mean, I—that's—that's what I mostly used it for.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] On the GI Bill.

WOLF KAHN: Yes, yes. But, I mean, you know, it wasn't quite—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: I don't want to sound like I was the world's—world's answer to women. [Paul Cummings laughs.] In those days, I was—I—I was barely a virgin, and—and, uh, uh, the women that I picked up were just as troubled as I was.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: So it was a whole lot of very inept goings-on [Paul Cummings laughs] there for a while. In fact, you know, during that whole period.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. But, now, where—how—how did you get to the Hofmann School?

WOLF KAHN: Well, I—I got to the Hofmann School after the first semester at the New School. I could see it wasn't a serious place.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So you only spent how long at the New School?

WOLF KAHN: One semester.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, just a—it was a—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —little look-see, and that was enough.

WOLF KAHN: [Cross talk.] Yeah, that's right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And, uh, then, uh, you know, the word was around that that was the place to go.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And, uh, I just—just—and the Hofmann School was, uh, uh—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —handy [ph]?

WOLF KAHN: —accredited for the GI Bill.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Right, right.

WOLF KAHN: That was—you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But, now, had you worked—because—had you worked from models or anything before this?

WOLF KAHN: At the New School?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: You mean—yeah. Even in—I also went—way early, I went to the Art Students League, you know, to work from the nude models—

PAUL CUMMINGS: What, when you were at Music & Art?

WOLF KAHN: —[cross talk].

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I didn't know that.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who did you work with there?

WOLF KAHN: There was just a sketch class.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see.

WOLF KAHN: Saturday morning sketch class. [00:44:00]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, like the Atelier business in Paris, where you—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —just go and draw, and that's—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, [cross talk].

PAUL CUMMINGS: No criticism or anything in particular.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. Right, right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you like that? Was it useful, meeting the other people in the League?

WOLF KAHN: At the League? No, I think I went just with a couple friends from M & A.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Anyway, I had a job, also. I've neglected to mention this. During the war, there was, you know—uh, everybody was—was off.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Right.

WOLF KAHN: All the young people were off. And my brother had had a job as a commercial artist's assistant, which I inherited at the age of 14.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: So I always had money in my jeans.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who was—who was that working for?

WOLF KAHN: I worked for Louis Hahn [ph] Studios on 24th—Stone Street, right near Wall Street.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And he worked mostly for the National City Bank, and for Childs Restaurants.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Designed menu covers, and things like that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right.

WOLF KAHN: It was fun. It was good.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And I worked after school, on Saturdays, and one summer.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Paystubs and type [ph], and all that.

WOLF KAHN: Paystubs, right, and I did spots, and I did a lot of illustration, and I made a few posters. Things like that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. Serious stuff.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But it didn't catch. I mean, you really—

WOLF KAHN: Well, I mean, I thought—I thought I was—I thought it would be great. By the time I was 24, I could say, I'm a commercial artist with 10 years of experience. [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: That would have been quite a coup.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: But then, somehow, you know, when I went in—in the service, I think I started thinking that I really didn't want to be a commercial artist.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: That, you know, I knew what it was all about, that—that—that they all complained about their clients, that you couldn't really do what you wanted to do. I always thought I was a big shot, you know. I mean, I still do. It's probably one of my—one of my reasons for my—my—my general unhappiness. [Paul Cummings laughs.] It's not a good way to think about yourself.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, but it—supported yourself very well.

WOLF KAHN: Huh?

PAUL CUMMINGS: It had supported yourself.

WOLF KAHN: Well, you see, I always feel like—I mean, I'm programmed to be successful. [00:46:03]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: It's terrible. I mean, ever since my grandmother's house, you know, where I used to be invited to show my drawings to, um, to the bridge ladies, and oohs, and ahhs, and stuff. You know, and then always—all through high school and everything, I was always the hotshot, you know. Hofmann's was a very bitter experience for me, for that very reason. Because all of a sudden, here I was. I was in the same class with Larry Rivers, and Paul Georges, and Joan—Joan, uh—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —Mitchell.

WOLF KAHN: —Mitchell. And—and, um, a whole lot of people who drew and painted like—like, you know, good [inaudible], you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: They drew and painted like angels, and they were five years older than me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And Hofmann paid more attention to them than he paid to me. You know, I could see that I wasn't God's answer to the art world after all.

PAUL CUMMINGS: There was some competition out there. [Laughs.]

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, yeah. It's—it's hard for me to deal with that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How—how did you like going—you know, going to the Hofmann, and what—what did you do there?

WOLF KAHN: Well, I did what all the other Hofmann students do, draw straight lines. [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Then he tears it up.

WOLF KAHN: Right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did he do that with you?

WOLF KAHN: Sure, sure. But I—uh, you know, I got a lot out of Hofmann.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: I mean, he was a great man. He really was.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did he speak German to you, or no?

WOLF KAHN: No. He said—he said to me [speaks with German accent], "I am [inaudible] and man without an country. I forgot the German, and know not how to speak English, *und* French I only know how to say [inaudible]." [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: But he had so much gusto all the time, you know?

WOLF KAHN: Yes. He did. He did.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I mean, there seemed to be endless supplies of energy.

WOLF KAHN: Yes. He was—and he was a great teacher, of course, as everybody knows.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: He did what—he was a great teacher.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you think—

WOLF KAHN: His teaching method—

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you find that [ph]?

WOLF KAHN: His—his teaching method, uh, you just, sort of, had the feeling that here was a guy who, if you only tried to understand hard enough what he was saying, [Paul Cummings laughs] you would have all the answers. [00:48:14]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: I mean, he had that much credibility. You know? Who nowadays has that?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, he was always—you know, from the time I knew about him, I guess in the early '50s, he was so above the rest of the teachers around.

WOLF KAHN: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I mean, in terms of what he was doing, and the people that went after him, and the—you know, all the other stuff.

WOLF KAHN: Oh, sure, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Although—

WOLF KAHN: And he was always—he was very—he was really—I mean, he wasn't only a great teacher, but he was a superior human being.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: I mean, you, sort of, knew by looking at him and talking to him that you were dealing with—with somebody extraordinary.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: I mean, none of us liked his paintings.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

WOLF KAHN: No. No, in fact it took me many years to get to like Hofmann's paintings. Now I like them rather well.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, you're kidding.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So [cross talk]—

WOLF KAHN: Well, I mean, there's a certain lack of elegance in his painting that—that's very clear to see, and it's—it's a little off-putting, too.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Um, if you're—and—and the things that he taught—I always felt that he taught, sort of, in spite of what he painted.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But does anybody know what he really taught? I mean, did you—

WOLF KAHN: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —could you understand what he was [cross talk]?

WOLF KAHN: I had a very—oh, yes, you had a very clear—I once wrote—in fact, I wrote an essay on the Hofmann School, which I presented in front of the , um, uh, CAA convention in a panel, in which I think I wrote it down very clearly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: I think it's been published in other places. Yeah, I—I think one had a very clear idea of where Hofmann stood.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And at the same time, he constantly contradicted himself.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

WOLF KAHN: You know, still [ph]. He was like the Bible, you know. I mean, the Bible constantly contradicts itself, and yet you—you have a, sort of, a general feeling of where it wants you to go.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, yeah. [00:50:00] So he would say one thing on one day, and another thing the next?

WOLF KAHN: Yes. For example, expressionistic was an adjective that he used either as a term of extreme opprobrium or—or praise, depending on [they laugh]—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —what he felt at the moment?

WOLF KAHN: —what he felt at the moment, or the context, or, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You certainly couldn't take him literally. You know, there was nothing, really, that could be taken absolutely literal.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: It was too—he was too many-sided [ph] for that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the other students that you were in class with?

WOLF KAHN: Well, there was Rivers, who—who was, um—who was, uh, sort of, a gadfly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: I had a lot of respect for him, because he was clearly also a very interesting personality. And he used to—Hofmann used to say, "The first thing about a work of art that you have to remember is it has four sides." Everything is in relation to the four sides, you see? So Rivers brought in, um, a little scrap of a—of a Leonardo drawing that was, uh, torn from—you know, and it had no sides at all. [They laugh.] And Hofmann—it was torn out of a sketchbook.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: And, uh, when Hofmann, um, was carrying on this way once, Rivers had this thing all ready, and he said, "Mr. Hofmann, is—is this art? It doesn't have four sides." [They laugh.] So Hofmann looked up, you know, and—and he said [speaks with German accent], "Ah, this is [inaudible]. Very good, [inaudible], always you should ask question. Now, like I was saying, uh—" [They laugh.] He was—he was—you know, he was about the battle.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: He wasn't going to, um—

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you think it was that so many diversified personalities received from him, or were able to get stimulated by him?

WOLF KAHN: Well, I think for one thing, it was an astonishing moment in history. [00:52:02]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You know, that here were all of these energies let loose after the war.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: People who hadn't—uh, I—I think in general, it was—it was just—that generation was ready to do something, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you can't line up 10 Hofmann students and look at their mature work, and say, That's Hofmann, that's Hofmann, that's Hofmann.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, well, no, no. It's because he, uh, um—he taught us—the first thing he taught us to do is to look at art history.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You know, to look at the works of the past, not just what was happening last week.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really? I mean, he sent you to the Met, and the Modern, and places like that, or—

WOLF KAHN: He didn't send us there. He just talked constantly about Rembrandt. Like he said—he made statements—I remember some of the things he said, I used to—he had me mystified. He says, "The most beautiful thing about Rembrandt are the empty spaces." You know? Well, of course, in terms of Hofmann's context, now I understand what he meant.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Sure. Yeah, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: But I used to go to the Met, you know, and look at the Rembrandts, and say, Hmm, I wonder what he means.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where's the empty space he's talking about? What is it? Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. And, uh, uh, then he'd talk about Giotto. He'd talk—I mean, he constantly talked about the—the great artists of the past. And I think he really got us all involved in a very wide culture, you know, a culture of painting.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And from there, of course, you can go anywhere. Once you—once you're involved in that, that liberates you to go in different directions.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And one of the sad things about the education of the artists, young artists, today, is that they're all educated with—with attitudes, you know, with—with—with au courant, sort of, sort of, um—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. [00:54:00]

WOLF KAHN: And nobody wants to be on the scrap heap of history, you know, so they all—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you go to a school of visual arts today, and you see what everybody saw Saturday. It's amazing how quickly they pick up—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —the new things.

WOLF KAHN: And I think what Hofmann fostered is an idea that—also the difficulty of it, that—that primarily, to forge an artistic personality is something that takes many years, by his example. I mean, he—he had his first show when he was 50 years old, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And also, we had a, sort of, an idea that—nobody thought about success, because nobody had it. There was no—no example of it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: There wasn't anybody [cross talk].

WOLF KAHN: The people who were having success—the Whitney Museum was right down the street, on Eighth Street.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right.

WOLF KAHN: And we used to go there and laugh at the things. You know, we used to laugh at [Yasuo] Kuniyoshi, with those silly women with their—with—with the petticoat straps hanging over their arms. And coming from the heady level of Hofmann, you know, you looked at those things and you laughed.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You know, now I can look at Kuniyoshi, and I can see certain advantages in it, but in those days—and—and who else was there? Spiker [ph].

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yeah. And Burchfield, and Hopper, and [cross talk].

WOLF KAHN: And, uh, Thomas Hart Benton.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: Well, you looked at those things, and you'd say, Well, what's that got to do with the price of fish, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: On the other hand, Hofmann, uh, admired—in those days, even—Pollock. You know, he was just coming on the scene. And also, I remember him talking very highly about, uh, um—what's that guy from the west coast?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Still? Stevenson [ph]?

WOLF KAHN: Still. Yeah, Still.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Still, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: And we looked at Still and—and Pollock, and couldn't make head or tail out of that, either, because that also didn't seem to fit within the confines of—[00:56:00]

PAUL CUMMINGS: —what he was saying.

WOLF KAHN: —what Hofmann was talking about. We could understand Mondrian. We could understand Cubism. We could understand, you know, anything that had a basis in art history that was very readily at hand.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Um, but, um—but Hofmann? No, he was—he was really—he was up to date, and at the same time, he reverberated backwards, you know, into the—into the whole past.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Would he give you assignments to go to museums or galleries?

WOLF KAHN: No. He didn't treat us as students at all.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

WOLF KAHN: No. He—nobody had assignments. Nobody—you know, we were just—he didn't—he didn't care whether we worked or not. [Cross talk.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You had to keep your own self-motivation going.

WOLF KAHN: Oh, yeah. Well, that's—of course.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: Of course. And self-motivation was no problem. Everybody was just so—so hot in that school. I mean, it was incredibly—

PAUL CUMMINGS: But what—yeah.

WOLF KAHN: —a hothouse atmosphere in that school. And—and we weren't even competitive—that's the funny thing—either, because there didn't seem to be—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, because everybody was so different, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: —there didn't seem to be anything to compete over, you know? The—the trough was nonexistent, so the pigs didn't have to push each other out of the way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And de Kooning was just—well, he had his first show in '48.

WOLF KAHN: De Kooning—yeah. Hardly anybody knew anything about him.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: I think I maybe heard his name once or twice.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: It was a strange period.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where were you living then?

WOLF KAHN: I was living on the Lower East Side, on—in—in a building, right—I was living right across the hall from Lester Johnson.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Oh, really?

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. Lester found this apartment for me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Which one was that?

WOLF KAHN: On East Sixth Street.

PAUL CUMMINGS: First—Sixth Street. Oh, that apartment [ph].

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, 538 East Sixth Street. And the building was full of—full of—it was a real slum. It was full of people who were ill, you know, and who were neurotic, and who committed suicide, and who did terrible things. It smelled.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm. Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. It was a—it was a real slum, but it wasn't dangerous. [00:58:01]

PAUL CUMMINGS: He talked a lot about that.

WOLF KAHN: Lester did?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah? Did he mention me, the fact that we, uh—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah. I'd forgotten it, but [cross talk].

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, we had a lot to do with each other.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Where did you meet [cross talk]?

WOLF KAHN: Lester was a big influence on me. He really was. And in—in general, a very beneficial influence.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what way?

WOLF KAHN: Well, I mean, I was just so troubled as an art student, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And, um—and Lester was more mature.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And I'd just take my—my—my things to him. And Lester didn't—he was just, you know—he didn't want to get involved in my troubles. And at the same time, he responded on some other level, on—on the artistic level, you know, and as a friend.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where did you meet him? Where did you meet him?

WOLF KAHN: I think I met him there. I think, uh, somebody told me that that apartment was available, and Lester had told them. That's how I met Lester. And then—then our—our paths went parallel for quite a few years, because we, uh, took a house on Second Avenue together.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's the building I was thinking of.

WOLF KAHN: Right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The notorious house of—[laughs].

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. And then—and then—and then we got thrown out of there, because we tried to fight the landlord to get our rent reduced. And I've always admired Lester. I still do. I just saw his show the other day, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, the new one at [inaudible], yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, yeah. And I think he's still going—going great guns.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Inaudible]—paintings get tougher, in a way.

WOLF KAHN: Well, he's a tough—he's a tough egg, that's true. [Paul Cummings laughs.] He's plenty tough. You know, he's gone through—I'm sure, if you've interviewed him—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I know, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: —you know all the things he's gone through. He was a CO [conscientious objector] during the war. In fact, one of the things that happened to me, because of Les, I avoided the Korean War. Because, um, I was—you know, I'd only been in service 13 months.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, right. And you were still up for grabs [inaudible].

WOLF KAHN: I was still up for grabs. I would have been up for grabs, except I met Lester. [01:00:00] And I—I—in order to get out at 13 months, I signed over into the Naval Reserve. Then you could get out faster. And, um, then Lester convinced me that I really should be a—I—I became convinced from meeting Lester and meeting his friends, that I really should become a conscientious objector and pacifist. So I—well, the first thing I definitely had to do was to sign out of the reserve. So I went there, and they gave me a long song and dance—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: —about, wasn't I afraid to lose my rating, and so forth and so on? I said, No, I really don't believe in war anymore, and so forth.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: And then when, uh—if I'd—you know, I would have been called up immediately.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Absolutely, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Then when the war started, they called me down to the draft board and looked me over, because I was one month over the—if you'd served 12 months, you were no longer subject to the draft. So they were—they were, um, drafting fathers of two children, and so forth, you know. And they looked at me. Uh, uh, and here I was, you know—

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Thirteen months.

WOLF KAHN: —a live body, just one month. They were very frustrated with me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And you weren't about to, uh, go along with it.

WOLF KAHN: No, sir.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Uh-huh [affirmative]. Um, but, yeah, going back to the Hofmann School, um, you know, it was full of very dynamic personalities. How did they affect you? I mean, all of those diversified people, and—

WOLF KAHN: Well, we became friends.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —their way of living, and thinking, and, uh—

WOLF KAHN: We—we thought alike. We lived fairly—you know, the style of life was fairly, uh, uh, close, with some deviations. I mean, I mean, I was friends with Miles Forst. I was friends with, uh, uh—who else was I friends with at the Hofmann School, at that time? Well, Jan. I was good friends with Jan Müller.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Müller, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: And we all, sort of, thought alike. We'd all taken, you might say, this monastic vow of poverty.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Nobody cared to—about—we didn't really care about success. [01:02:02] You know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, I think people were very busy finding out what they were about, and what their art was about, and—

WOLF KAHN: Right, right. We—we did—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —building of bases [ph] to work from.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, right. Yeah, and then, of course, what happened later on is that, then when I—I took this loft here, I met Felix Pasilis through Jan.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And Felix and Jan were about to—they were very eager to start showing, and I didn't feel like I was ready to show. But, um, uh, somehow or other, we had this universe in dis—of discourse in common, because we all went to the Hofmann School.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right. But did you have any contact with Art Students League people, or Cooper Union, or anything else?

WOLF KAHN: No, no.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was pretty much—

WOLF KAHN: No.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was really concentrated on that [ph].

WOLF KAHN: Very concentrated on Hofmann School.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes.

WOLF KAHN: Well, actually, let's see. I had contact with Arnold Singer, who, at that time, went—yeah, studied, I think, at the League with Barnett.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah. How did you meet him?

WOLF KAHN: Well, he took over Lester's apartment.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see. So then—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. I got him Lester's apartment when Lester left.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Uh-huh [affirmative], uh-huh [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: But I felt he was—you know, I thought—we thought all teachers other than Hofmann were of a lesser breed, which, in fact, they were.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] That's true.

[END OF TRACK AAA_kahn77_4706_r.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: —[inaudible] side two. Anyway, but to continue on Hofmann a little bit. Uh, now, was there any preparation for him, because you'd studied with one of his students beforehand at Music & Art, or were you so shocked by the whole thing, or startled, or delighted, or whatever the response was, to really work with him?

WOLF KAHN: I don't recall my, uh, response as be—having been—I think we—Hofmann, sort of, crept up on you. You know, he wasn't that, uh, uh, brilliant, uh, charged character. I mean, there was very little, actually. I think it's the accretion of—of—of things that made you into a—into a Hofmann admirer, you know, because he was—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: He didn't—he certainly made no fuss over any of his students, you know. Uh, I always felt that—that what—what happened in the school was most important was meeting the other guys, I mean, the other students.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. And everybody went to, um, the coffee places, and—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, we all sat around the Waldorf.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right.

WOLF KAHN: And, uh, uh, well, it was—it was a strange, strange school, because, uh, you know, the whole idea of school takes a new definition at Hofmann's. I mean, he—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, how do you mean that, in terms of—

WOLF KAHN: Well, he was a—he wasn't really a devoted teacher, either. One always, sort of, felt—you know, one felt about Hofmann like patients do who go to a famous doctor. Like, you know, the doctor's doing them a favor to see them. They're not doing—doing him a favor by paying him his fee, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right.

WOLF KAHN: Uh, and Hofmann, also, he used to come in. [00:02:00] And, uh, uh, you know, the—there was this extra—before a critique, you know, there was this expectant hush. Now he's going to tell us—tell me whether I'm good or bad, [laughs] you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right.

WOLF KAHN: And then he'd go down the line, and say something to everybody, and work on their drawings, and—and, um, uh, everybody cared what he had to say, and students followed him.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You know, stood behind him. But you always had this, sort of, a feeling almost of reluctance on his part, that he'd rather be somewhere else. And in fact, he probably would have rather been in his studio.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, yeah. How did you like his device of working on your work? Because a lot of people resented that.

WOLF KAHN: At the Hofmann School? No.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

WOLF KAHN: Really? They did? They resented that?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I've talked to several people who left the school because they [inaudible].

WOLF KAHN: Well, they deserved to leave it, [Paul Cummings laughs] because this—you know, I mean, it was a perfectly reasonable device. Why not? You know? He knew more than you did. I mean, that's why you went there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Whatever—whatever would most graphically, uh, um, show his complex ideas was—was most useful.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: I don't care whether he tore up drawings or—I was a good Hofmann student, I suppose. Maybe too good, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Nobody ever made notes in his class [inaudible]?

WOLF KAHN: No. Although—although later on, when, uh, you know, when he got to be a really famous teacher—when I was there, he wasn't all that famous a teacher, either. He was, sort of, like a well-kept secret, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, but then there were those mimeographed sheets that he used to hand out. Did you ever get those?

WOLF KAHN: No.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That must have been later.

WOLF KAHN: No, that was later. By that—he didn't take himself as seriously in the—in the '40s as he did in the '50s and early '60s, either. Because, after all, what happens to us is, when the world tells us we're great, we start taking ourselves seriously.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: You know, one of the best things that ever happened to me is nobody's ever told me that. [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Except yourself.

WOLF KAHN: No. No, no. I don't tell it to myself, either.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: No, I don't think I'm great. I think I'm a talented artist, and I think I'm probably as good as—I'm probably the best landscape painter around right now. [00:04:04] You know, I don't know anybody else who—who's doing anything with landscape that's as interesting as what I'm doing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm. But now what—what about the—the interplay—

WOLF KAHN: Don't publish that. [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the interplay with the other students there? Because, you know, for several years, he did have, really, quite an extraordinary collection of—

WOLF KAHN: Well, we all—we all went to each other's studios.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: We took an interest in each other's work, you know. I went and talked at the Studio School a couple of years back, and, um, like, the topic of my talk—you know, they're so used to having guys coming and talking about themselves—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: —which is something I never really think is all that interesting. You know, I mean, I figure they don't have to hear me talk about myself. They can see my paintings.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Look at the work, and—right, right.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. Um, but what art students are really interested in is, like, how other people went through art school, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Oh, sure.

WOLF KAHN: So I—yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did they learn, and what did they—where did they find the [inaudible].

WOLF KAHN: And, uh, so I talked—my subject was, how to be an art student. And, um, um, I talked, first of all, of how—how all good art schools are very depressing, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Because there's all this—this sense of—of—of uncertainty, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And, um, then the thing—the students became very open with me as a result of this talk.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And when it came time for them to, uh, to talk to me and ask questions, they complained bitterly about each other.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: And said that what's really bad at the Studio School is the sense of competitiveness, that nobody takes an interest in—in—in another person's work, except insofar as they feel it a threat to their own work.
[00:06:00]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: But there's none—and in Hofmann, there was none of that, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Well, that's a post-1960 situation, I think.

WOLF KAHN: Well, I don't know what it is. But anyway, I think that's one of the really, um, healthy things that happened at the school, that we all—like, you know, especially if Hofmann liked somebody's work, we—we all, uh, uh—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —went and gave it a special look.

WOLF KAHN: —went and gave it a special look, and—and we felt, also, that this must be an extremely interesting person, you know, [they laugh] and we tried to get to know—I remember Jean Follett.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Do you remember Jean?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, sure.

WOLF KAHN: She used to make these fisheye drawings then. They were very strange.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And strange assemblages. They were a little later.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. Well, uh, we, um—we used to—and she was a very strange girl.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Still is.

WOLF KAHN: And, uh, I remember Hofmann used to love her drawings. Whatever she did, he just adored it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. [Paul Cummings laughs.] And we couldn't quite—we couldn't quite make head or tail, but we became very interested in her.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: You know, instead of saying, Oh, that bitch, you know, like, the teacher—she's a teacher's pet, or something like that. You know, there wasn't any of that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: You know, we were—and the fact is that most people were older, you know. That here was all these GIs who were, like, 25 years old. You know, Georges, and Felix Pasilis, and Jan, they were all older people.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And they were beyond that, kind of, sort of—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, you were young.

WOLF KAHN: I was very young, yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Yes, and—

PAUL CUMMINGS: But, now, there was—it's fascinating, because Hofmann really wasn't showing much in those days. I mean, you didn't see Hofmann paintings a great deal, did you?

WOLF KAHN: Well, we did. I did, especially, because I was his monitor, and I helped, uh, especially in Provincetown. He gave me a—a summer free, because my GI Bill wouldn't cover it. It had already run out, or—or it was about to run out, and I didn't want to spend—so I asked Hofmann if I could work for him. So I saw his work pretty—

PAUL CUMMINGS: And what was that like?

WOLF KAHN: Well, I—actually, I had, um, I had a very close relationship with him, as close as one could have, or as close as I could have, being his student. [00:08:07]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, and also he was 50 years older than you were.

WOLF KAHN: And, uh, and, uh, but, um, I—I did his work for—I worked for him in his studio, stretched out canvases and did things like that. And I worked around the house. Um, and I ate lunch with him.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh.

WOLF KAHN: He'd take me to lunch. Yes. So I got to know [inaudible] very well. And I got to—yeah, and then I also—but the—again, the funny—the thing that was nice is, nobody made a big fuss about Hofmann then, so it was—I wasn't awed. I wasn't—you know, I was just—I just liked the man, you know, because he, uh, was, um—he had, like you say, zest.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But did it give you, you know, a view of what it was like to be a painter, or a teacher, or somebody who was doing things, or—or didn't you think of it?

WOLF KAHN: I didn't think of it—

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Cross talk] in those terms.

WOLF KAHN: —like that. I didn't think of it quite like that. I mean, and Hofmann was—he was pretty out of reach in that regard already, too.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You know, he had—he lived very comfortably in this beautiful house in P-town. He was old enough to be my grandfather.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right.

WOLF KAHN: And he had Miró hanging on the wall, Brach, you know, and a whole room of Vivin, little primitives.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: And—and he was very much into, uh, living in a certain style. And, of course, I felt, well, that goes with age. I didn't—didn't feel it was anything to be emulated, because I was—I was rather pleased with my own austerity, you know, asceticism.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Hmm. So what year was that, that you worked, uh—

WOLF KAHN: This was 19—the summer of '47.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The summer of '47.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you studied with him from '40—[00:10:00]

WOLF KAHN: '40—I think it was—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —'47 to '49?

WOLF KAHN: —let's see, the fall—from—from February '46, I studied with him, until the spring of '48.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And the summer of '47 was spent in Provincetown.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Had you been there before, or was that your first—

WOLF KAHN: First summer, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And you went there because of him, or because of—

WOLF KAHN: Yes, of course.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you like it?

WOLF KAHN: Well, it was great. Again, it was terribly intense, you know. Terribly intense.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But, now, he had different students up there, didn't he, than in New York?

WOLF KAHN: No. No, no, they were the same people. Uh, Goodnough was there. The hot shots, I think, that summer were Nell Blaine, and Goodnough, and, uh, uh, Jane Freilicher—no, Jane Freilicher wasn't even a hot shot. She was just—she and—Larry was around, but he was just, sort of, on the edges of the school.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Um, but Georges was there. Uh, and I think the big star in that summer was Goodnough, because he was working a mile a minute. He used to bring in, for a weekly crit, 12 paintings. Grillo, John Grillo, was a hot shot.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yeah, right, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: You know, everybody liked him.. And then there was a guy named Alfred Israel, who was one of the real victims of—of—he's still around.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

WOLF KAHN: He's still around. He's, uh—and, in fact, now his work is very influenced by Hofmann, but very stiff and tight. Something happened to him. But he was—he was doing terrific, sort of, neoplastic paintings.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

WOLF KAHN: Very good. Hofmann adored him [ph]. And there was—Leatrice Rose was there that summer.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Also doing very good work.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And then as a result of that summer—and Greenberg came. Clem Greenberg came and visited the school.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: And as a result of that, there was an exhibition of students' work. [00:12:00]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Um, uh, at the Seligmann Galleries, called "Summer of '47"—"Summer of '48"? Maybe it was '48. Or "Provincetown, 1948." I think that was the name of the exhibition, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah. And that was all—

WOLF KAHN: And that was all—it was, uh, um, uh, Georges; Goodnough; a guy named Patrick Dinan [ph], who has since disappeared; Leatrice Rose; Nell Blaine; um, was Jane Freilicher in that show? I don't remember.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I don't even know that exhibition.

WOLF KAHN: But I remember the first time I ever got turned on to pot was at a party at Jane's house. There was the usual Mexican, bringing a paper bag.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Gosh, yeah. Fantastic. [Laughs.]

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, and then Clem Greenberg, after initiating this show and selecting the artists, also wrote a thing on it in the *Nation*. He was writing for the *Nation* then.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Right.

WOLF KAHN: And he praised the show, thought it was quite a good selection, and so forth. [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Clem is a great lesson in subtlety, I think, at times, you know. Or political savoir faire.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. Do you think all those guys that he touts are going to last? I mean, I—

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's too hard. I mean, it's too broad, too, um—

WOLF KAHN: You know, somebody like Walitski [ph]. I think it's very thin.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Very thin.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's getting thinner.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's getting thinner [inaudible]. Now, where did the University of Chicago come into all of this?

WOLF KAHN: Well, then I under—then I underwent a crisis, after I got out of Hofmann. And I said to Hofmann, I said, "Look, I'm going to have to quit the school, because I'm in trouble." I became very neurotic. I—my work suffered, and so forth. [00:14:00] I used to work on one painting for three months.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, just painting no—

WOLF KAHN: You know, until—[inaudible] painting over and over. Small paintings, you know, that weighed 10 pounds when I was done with them. And, um—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Sort of painting the images [ph] out.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, like the *Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu*, you know, something like that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: And, uh, and then I went up to Hofmann, and I said, "You know, I really have to leave." And

Hofmann said [speaks with German accent], "Ah, *das ist* very good. You have mental indigestion." [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: He could get something positive out of almost anything, couldn't he?

WOLF KAHN: No, well, he—you know, he was also—no, he called them as he saw them. I don't think you could call—call him a—an unduly—he had a tragic view of life, too, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But I mean, even out of a problem, if he would get something that would—

WOLF KAHN: Well, he felt—he felt that you had to go through things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Yeah, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Which we all know is true, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But how did you pick Chicago? I mean—

WOLF KAHN: Well, then I decided—I spent a whole year by myself on the 52-20 Club.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, right.

WOLF KAHN: I don't know if you remember that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: Um, but—and during that year, I just stewed in my own juice.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you work in a studio? What—

WOLF KAHN: Yes, I worked—that's when I lived with Lester on Second Avenue.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And, um, uh, at the end of—during that year, I applied to Chicago, because I felt, well, I'm going slowly from bad to worse. I'd better forget about being a painter altogether. You know, because Hofmann had filled me with such a—some exalted idea of what it took to be an artist. I figured I'd never make it. And, um, you know, I really had a real crisis. I became impotent. I became a kleptomaniac in grocery stores.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: I figured, well, you know, nothing's worth becoming a nut over.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: So I'd better quit.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: So the last time I felt I had my dignity was when I was a high school student, because I was always, you know—[00:16:03]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: —a big shot there, got high grades. So, well, I said, I'll go back to school and see what happens. So then I applied to Chicago. I'd always had very good grades in high school. I had no problem getting in anywhere. And I had one more year of GI Bill. And at Chicago, under Hutchins's program, you could get your degree in a year, which I did.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you study there?

WOLF KAHN: Well, I studied the Chicago Program, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You took tests when you were ready for them, you know, so I got—got my Chicago degree in a year. And I was going to go on to, um—I applied for a scholarship to go on to, um, to the school of humanities at Chicago, and go for a master's. But before I went to do that, I decided to go with a friend of Lester's, actually,

who was—who had been Mennonite, uh, to go out west and work in—in the, um, logging industry, in the woods in Oregon.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's where the lumberjack business comes in [ph].

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. And when I was in the woods in Oregon, I got this letter from Chicago, saying that you've just been given a full scholarship plus, uh, \$1500 for—toward room and board.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And then I figured, gee, if I'm not good, I'm good enough to go back to New York and be a painter. Fuck [ph] Chicago, [they laugh] they all [inaudible].

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, [inaudible], really. Huh.

WOLF KAHN: But I was really careful. I let my—my scholarship lapse semester by semester. Like, the first semester, I wrote them that I wasn't feeling well, and I would like to enter—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —the next time.

WOLF KAHN: —the next time. And by that time, it was—I'm—it seemed so—so ridiculous to go back to school, [Paul Cummings laughs] even though I wasn't making a cent, you know, and I was—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative]. [Cross talk.]

WOLF KAHN: No, actually, I had a job by then. [00:18:00] I had a job working with kids.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really? [Cross talk.]

WOLF KAHN: In New York. Yeah. Because, you know, I had to make my living.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: But I painted, uh, all the rest of the time. I got this loft here.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, how long were you in Oregon? Just a few months?

WOLF KAHN: Six months.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Six months.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And in the logging.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, and I had a lot of money. I made a lot of money out there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, because that's a—

WOLF KAHN: You know, they paid the highest minimum wage there for unskilled labor, \$1.85 an hour. Incredible, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And there was nothing to spend it on.

WOLF KAHN: Well, actually, there was. In fact, I lived in a—in—in the lumber camp, you know, and I had to spend something like \$30 a week for my room and board. But still, I made so much money.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you like lumberjack life?

WOLF KAHN: It's great. Very romantic.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Healthy. Outdoors.

WOLF KAHN: Beautiful. And I kept drawing all the time. You know, all through Chicago.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh.

WOLF KAHN: I kept drawing. I drew by the lakefront, you know, make pastels and so forth.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you go to the museum in Chicago?

WOLF KAHN: Went to the museum. Yeah. But no, I—you know, my thing is always, like—like, I think wrongly, I'm sure, but I think there's more art in nature than in the museums.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: I mean, I get much more of a—of a kick by walking a solitary walk than to go see a show.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, you've never really—as I think back on the work of yours I've seen, never got to be a, kind of, totally abstract painter. Were you?

WOLF KAHN: I got very close to it—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, but I mean—

WOLF KAHN: —at the Hofmann School.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —even with the Hofmann business, it—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, but it never—never really, you know, never—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And Hofmann was always—he was strange. He encouraged—he was interested in people who were—who were interested in representation. He used to say that the problem with modern art is, it has no human content.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: That's one of the things he said.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I wonder what he meant by that, though.

WOLF KAHN: Well, by that, he meant that it didn't say anything, uh, uh, that—that—that fed—that fed the feelings, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: Uh, you know, he used to hold up Rembrandt and Goya as being people who had human content. [00:20:02]

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did he talk about as far as more contemporary people?

WOLF KAHN: Well, he talked about space. Mostly, you know, the handling of space, and—and, uh, the scale.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But he talked about it in abstract terms, then, rather than giving you—you know, referring to a Picasso [cross talk].

WOLF KAHN: Well, he wouldn't—he wouldn't even—he didn't even—he didn't even, uh, uh, talk very much in an elucidating way about—about other artists.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: He'd tell stories. Like one of his favorite stories was—his favorite stories was about Picasso. Some ladies—you want me to tell it—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Sure.

WOLF KAHN: —in a Hofmann accent?

PAUL CUMMINGS: That would—well. [They laugh.]

WOLF KAHN: He said [speaks with German accent], "Von Dame and Lady Knacker [ph] go out to Picasso. She see this beautiful still life of *ein* fish. *Und* she say, 'Monsieur Picasso, mon dieu, this is *ein* beautiful fish-nacker [ph] you do here [inaudible]. How you paint this fish?' *Und* Picasso say to her, 'Madame, first I eat him, then I paint him.'" [They laugh.] And he'd talk. I mean, his things—he would talk about empathy, and he would talk about, uh, symphonic intervals of color, and things like that, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: And of course, the push—push and pull thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: You squeeze the sausage here, it gets fatter there, and so forth.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: You know, that kind of stuff. Talked a lot about composition in that—in those kind of terms.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But I mean, it was never—oh, using other artists' work as—as a reference point.

WOLF KAHN: Not really. Well, no, except he'd say things like [speaks with German accent], "Now, Mondrian," he says, "is a matter of a millimeter adjustment." [00:22:01]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, yeah, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: [Laughs.] You know? He'd say, "To make—to make these areas vibrate is a matter of"—

PAUL CUMMINGS: But he wouldn't talk about Brach's still lifes or Picasso's use of other artists' work.

WOLF KAHN: Oh, he probably did.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: He probably did. But, uh, sort of, unsystematically, and—and just as—as it came into his head.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: He wasn't a brilliant lecturer, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I know. I know. But he always seemed to be—

WOLF KAHN: He talked—he talked mostly about formalistic problems.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: You know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, that's why I was curious about—

WOLF KAHN: He'd talk about color.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —the [inaudible] Rembrandt business, and—and—yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Well, he had a lot of arrows in his quiver, that old—[Paul Cummings laughs.] I mean, he really did.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: A lot of interests.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, going—going back to, um, to Chicago for a bit, how did you like Chicago?

WOLF KAHN: Well, it was an interesting, intense place, too.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Uh, it was a very intellectual atmosphere. It wasn't a rah-rah school at all. I wasn't involved at all in the usual college-type things, you know, and neither were the other kids.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was like going to a factory or something?

WOLF KAHN: No, no, it wasn't like that at all. No, I had—I still remember many of the teachers I had. I had a very—a very interesting teacher named Joe Schwab, who taught a course called, "Organization, Integration, and Interrelation of the Science of Knowledge."

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And it was epistemology, ontology, and theory of knowledge course. And very good. Very good. [inaudible] fantastic teacher.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And, you know, I used to bone up, read a page of Aristotle and try and make sense out of it. It would take me hours. I got to be able to read really difficult texts, like *The Critique of Pure Reason*, or something like that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Which now I wouldn't touch with a 10-foot pole. [00:24:01] I've become stupid since then. [Paul Cummings laughs.] Art makes you stupid.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think so?

WOLF KAHN: Well, I mean, it develops one side of the brain at the expense of the other.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But what—what do you think that, you know, year of education in Chicago, uh, did as far as—

WOLF KAHN: —did for me?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, as far as affecting your working, or thinking, or life in general?

WOLF KAHN: Well, it probably made it easier for me to get jobs.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] You had this nice degree.

WOLF KAHN: Because I had a degree.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But, I mean, did it help you in the studio?

WOLF KAHN: Well, it—it—it—

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Cross talk.]

WOLF KAHN: —it mostly helped me in a personal sense.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: It gave me back a sense of my own worth, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [Inaudible] had a lot of advantages.

WOLF KAHN: Um, and, uh, in the studio, I don't know what it did for me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Maybe it taught me to be more—I'm a very analytical painter, you know. I mean, people always talk, thinking I'm a very intuitive painter, but basically, I think I'm a very analytical painter.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Hmm. Why do you say that, and also that people think of you as being —

WOLF KAHN: Because they keep telling me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see.

WOLF KAHN: They think I'm very intuitive, and that I—you know, people talk about your work in—in ways that you can't possibly relate to, in the same way in which Sera [ph] said, uh, uh, "People talk about poetry. All I do is follow my system." You know? I mean, that's—that—I understand that completely, because that's, sort of—you know, I mean, nobody thinks about poetry when they work, unless you're a real fake.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You think about problems, certain—certain relations that you're—that you're trying to—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why is this falling off the edge of the canvas, or—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, something like that, or—or, uh, how can I bring more light into that area. You know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: I mean, the poetry is there. That's—but it's inchoate. It's something that—that—that you bring to bear on everything you do, uh, but you're not conscious of it. [00:26:03] In fact, if you are, God—you know—

PAUL CUMMINGS: But, I mean, it's not going to—

WOLF KAHN: —God help you.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. But, now, you came back from, uh, Oregon full of money, sharp axes, logs, that kind of thing.

WOLF KAHN: Right. And then I met through Jan—Jan Müller—I met Felix Pasilis, who was just—who had just rented this loft and was looking for a partner, and that's how I came here, 813 Broadway. And, uh, Felix was a splendid guy, too. A very interesting guy.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What's happened to him?

WOLF KAHN: He's dropped out. He really has dropped out.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I haven't seen him in years.

WOLF KAHN: Well, uh, the last thing, he's known to be in Mexico.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. But he had a brilliant mind, too.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I know. I always liked him.

WOLF KAHN: [Cross talk] very strange—very strange cast of thought. And he had a big influence on me, too.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what way?

WOLF KAHN: Because we lived together, and shared, uh—and shared attitudes, and bounced things off each other, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative]. But, now, he was—had quite a different point of view.

WOLF KAHN: Yes, yes, he did. Yes, he did. But, uh, well, he was—we both had respected each other's work. We only had a wall separating us, so naturally, there would be a lot going on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Took an interest in each other's work.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's really—I had a—anyway, so you came back and set up in this studio with—

WOLF KAHN: —with Felix, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —with Pasilis.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, and then I started painting like Soutine.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh. From what—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. Well, my—I saw a Soutine show, which just absolutely grabbed me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And a Van Gogh show, too. There was a—one big Van Gogh show at the Met.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Oh, the Soutines must have been, where, Pearl [ph] [inaudible]?

WOLF KAHN: No, I think at the Modern. There was a retrospective of Soutine.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, the museum show.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: And, uh, uh, those two artists just—just absolutely thrilled me. [00:28:01]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: And I painted in—indistinguishable from—from Van Gogh and Soutine for a while. You know, and you can see it in this painting here, that this is a lot of that influence. And that was, uh, in 1954. That was two years later, three years later. So I played in that realm for quite a while.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What appealed to you, I mean, about those two people?

WOLF KAHN: Well, it was the—for one thing, the texture. The—it seemed to me that they—there, I could combine what Hofmann had said about human content, and what—what I'd learned in the school about paint quality and things like that, you know. That's—and, uh—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm. What were you painting, as far as the—

WOLF KAHN: —subject?

PAUL CUMMINGS: —subject, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Oh, still lifes, mostly. Yeah, mostly still life, and then self-portraits, and—and then, um, uh, I painted a picture, a great—really nice picture. I have no idea where it is now—of a tuna fish head, from the back, you know, a head that's been severed from the body.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: You know, where the—the mass of the meat just, sort of, hangs in a formless mass, dripping blood, and then that's contrasted against that, sort of, real streamlined—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —shape—

WOLF KAHN: —shape of—of the head.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, that's one of the paintings I distinctly remember from that time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you don't know where it is.

WOLF KAHN: I have no idea where it is. Uh, I painted a sea—a dead—dead birds. I painted a lot of—I got—I used to get chickens from George Segal. Segal and Kaprow and I were pretty good friends in those days. Allan and I, in fact, went through Music & Art together.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: And, um, we were very close. We were good friends.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But he's so different in what he—what he—

WOLF KAHN: Well, Allan and I—Allan—it is very strange what happened with him. It's a—it's a lesson to—to—for all, because Allan used to be, sort of, in my orbit. [00:30:01] You know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And, um, he ended up, you know, following me into the Hofmann School, following me into the Hansa Gallery.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And, um—and then he met, uh—he spent a summer in Woodstock and met a modern composer whose name currently—Wolpe. Stefan Wolpe.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, Stefan Wolpe.

WOLF KAHN: And, um, sort of, you know, saw clearly the error of his ways in trying to be a painter. He threw it all up and became an avant garde personality. And, um, uh, has gone much further than any of us have, as far as becoming a culture hero [ph] is concerned, you see.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: But I never had, really, respect of him, because I always felt he was my follower.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] I'll never repeat that. [Laughs.]

WOLF KAHN: No, he was my follower, until he met Stefan Wolpe, and then—then a whole new era dawned on him, you see.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yeah, yeah. Then he became the prophet, and the [inaudible], and the—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. Yeah, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's [inaudible].

WOLF KAHN: But anyway, in those days, Allan and, uh, um, um—what's his name—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —Segal?

WOLF KAHN: —uh, George and I, we—we hung out together a lot. And George had that chicken farm.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: And all the chickens were dying like—like flies from Bang's disease or something, and—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh.

WOLF KAHN: —and I used to bring them home in—in shopping bags, lay them down on the table, and paint them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fantastic.

WOLF KAHN: You know, in a, sort of, Soutine-y way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Sometimes I ripped out feathers by the handful so as to really make a mess, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And I made some paintings of these plucked birds—or most of them still had their feathers. And then I also did a dead seagull, which I found on the beach in Provincetown. And I think Nell Blaine has that painting now. [00:32:00] She—it's one of the first paintings I sold.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What interested you in those—in those, um, objects, in those subjects? I mean, was it just that they were—

WOLF KAHN: They just grabbed me, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You know, I didn't—I didn't examine them, and I still don't—don't like to examine the symbolic interest.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's just something that's there, and—

WOLF KAHN: It's something that's there that grabs you. I mean, you know, of all the things that are in the world, some things grab you, and some things don't.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Right, right. That's true.

WOLF KAHN: You know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's true. So you really—once you started working in the studio—

WOLF KAHN: Oh, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —then everything started to go.

WOLF KAHN: That's when those [ph] things started to go.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. And I very—you know, and then they started the Hansa Gallery, and—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, how did that come about? Because you were early involved with that.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, well, it's—it happened right here at this—probably at this table where we're sitting now. It was Jan and Felix sitting around, and me reluctantly, um, sort of, listening to—to these older guys getting hungry to—to—for recognition and exposure.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And then Felix said, "Well, what about you, Wolf? You—you're a good painter. Why don't you come in?" I said, "I'm not ready."

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Anyway, I didn't think they were ready, you know. I mean, I knew those guys much too well. Familiarity breeds contempt, right?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And I thought, well, if it's just Jan and Felix and me, there's no—no need to do anything. Who's going to get excited about that?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And then Felix met Stankiewicz.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Right.

WOLF KAHN: And we all went down. Felix came in all excited. He says, "Boy, I met this sculptor. I used to know him at Hofmann's, but he's really doing some crazy work, and he's living with Jean Follett, and she's doing crazy work, too."

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: "Why don't you come down and take a look at it?" And I went down, and I was immediately fascinated. Of course, they were doing crazy work. And then—then Felix said, "Now—now, they're going to be part of the gallery, too." And I said, "Well, if they're going to be part of the gallery, I want to be part of the gallery, too." [00:34:02]

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Oh, really?

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, fantastic.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. That's how—and then—and then we, uh—

PAUL CUMMINGS: What made the change, from your point of view?

WOLF KAHN: Well, I mean, I—I figured, you know, like, if—if this—this new—this eye-opening work was going to be part of the gallery, then I want to be in on it. If it's just Felix Pasilis and Jan Müller, the hell with it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It wasn't enough.

WOLF KAHN: It wasn't enough. [Paul Cummings laughs.] And then we went around, and we—we looked at Jane

Wilson, and we liked her work. And, um, well, Miles Forst, and Jacques Beckwith, and a couple of other people that—that I also felt, sort of, well, you know, a big deal.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But where did—where did the name Hansa ever come from?

WOLF KAHN: Oh, I invented that. I invented that. I told them that, uh, the reason it was called Hansa was, uh, what—first of all, because of Hofmann, because all of us had gone to the Hofmann School, and secondly, because the Hansa was a league of independent cities in the middle ages.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, the Hanseatic League.

WOLF KAHN: Right. That got together for commercial gain. [Paul Cummings laughs.] And that was us. That was us. Defense against a hostile outside world, and commercial gain.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How marvelous.

WOLF KAHN: And to give each other, uh, privileges, and—and advantages, you see?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: So I figured, that's us.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Inaudible.] That's [inaudible]. But you did an exhibition here.

WOLF KAHN: Oh, the 813 Broadway show? Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. How did that—

WOLF KAHN: That was before we painted the place, when we first—when we were first, um, uh—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —yeah, here.

WOLF KAHN: —here. Well, that was Felix. He was a great entrepreneur. He was the, uh, uh, great impresario of that one.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But that was, like, your first public—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. Right. And we also got together the people that we admired, like I invited Lester, Lester Johnson. And Felix invited, uh, John Grillo. [00:36:00] And then there was, I think, Miles Forst, and—and—Felix, and I, and maybe one other person.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Six of you, then. Wasn't it six?

WOLF KAHN: Who else was there? Jan.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, and I—

PAUL CUMMINGS: How—how did you like it 10 years later, when Zabriskie reconstructed it?

WOLF KAHN: Well, it was instant history, you know. Nowadays, there's a lot of that. [Paul Cummings laughs.] Now—now they're going to have more of it. This winter in Soho, they're going to have the whole—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, the [cross talk].

WOLF KAHN: —[cross talk] 10th Street thing again, you know. And you're doing it, too. I mean, we're all conspiring to make instant history.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] But, you know, now, you were around the 10th Street galleries, but you were never really involved with any one particularly?

WOLF KAHN: Only with the Hansa.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Well, the Hansa was a 10th Street gallery, although we were on 12th Street.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: And then we moved up to 59th Street.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Fifty-ninth Street.

WOLF KAHN: But still, basically a 10th Street gallery.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But, now, who worked in the Hansa? Because various people worked—

WOLF KAHN: You mean, who were directors of it?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Well, in the beginning, uh, the first director I got through Tom Hess.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Tom—incidentally, I—um, I think it's got to be recorded that, um, Tom was a big help right from the start. And another person who was a big help right from the start was Meyer Schapiro. He came to our first show.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Had you met—

WOLF KAHN: Bought one of my—my drawings.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

WOLF KAHN: And I didn't—I didn't really know him, except from afar. I'd been an auditor in one of his courses at Columbia that Allan was taking, and he invited me to go and be an auditor. And I was—used to go home fascinated, and—and eager to get to work, you know, which is—because he was talking about art in a way that made me feel like painting, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, where did Hess come into it? How did you—

WOLF KAHN: And Tom? Tom came down—I don't know through whom. Through whom did Tom come down? I think through Fairfield.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Porter.

WOLF KAHN: Fairfield was the guy who—who we knew, and he was already a friend of Tom's. [00:38:00]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

WOLF KAHN: And Tom came down right away, and right away took an interest in the gallery.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you know Fairfield? From—from where?

WOLF KAHN: From—from around. From, you know—he was one of the boys. I knew him through Larry Rivers.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Larry, sort of, discovered Fairfield, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: You know, he took a house in Southampton because he was, sort of, going crazy in—when was that—in '53. And he introduced Fairfield to Johnny [John Bernard] Myers, and then Johnny gave him a show, where [ph] Fairfield first got to know us. He was also writing for the *Art News* as a critic.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Fairfield gave me my first good write up.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: In fact, the first write up I ever had for my first show was, right away, Fairfield Porter giving me a good write up.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, terrific. That was the Hansa exhibition.

WOLF KAHN: Hansa exhibition in '53.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did that—you know—anyway, you were going to tell me who the first person was that [inaudible].

WOLF KAHN: Oh, yeah. Anyway, Tom got this—this—this big huge girl from Sarah Lawrence, had just graduated college—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yeah. [laughs]

WOLF KAHN: —uh, uh, to be the director of the gallery. Her name was Anita Coleman, in those days, and her father was a very rich man. And, um, she was very shy, but she had marvelous friends, like—like Barbara Walters was one of her friends, and—and she got a lot of people to come down and take an interest in the gallery.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where is she now?

WOLF KAHN: Well, she's now Anita Manshel, and her husband is a, uh, um, publisher. He publishes *Foreign Policy* magazine, and the *Public Interest*.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: And he's a nice fellow. And they're big collectors of my work. And, uh, we're still good friends, although she's completely out of the art world.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah. Who followed her?

WOLF KAHN: Well, uh, after her, there was, uh, a lot of—a lot of, sort of, people who didn't last very long. [00:40:03]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And then we hired Richard Bellamy, Dick Bellamy, who came with a rose behind his ear.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where did you find him?

WOLF KAHN: Uh, he was a friend of Miles's.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But, now, was that downtown or uptown?

WOLF KAHN: No, by that time, we'd already moved uptown. Anita was there all the time we were downtown.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. But she—I think—no, she got married. That's what it was. And, um—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, because Dick used to live in the gallery, more or less, didn't he [inaudible]?

WOLF KAHN: Well, yeah, a bit. Well, you know, Dick—Dick is an ambiguous person. [Paul Cummings laughs.] He doesn't quite know what he does. Or at least he was then. Maybe he's less ambiguous now, although he's still plenty ambiguous.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: And then he couldn't do it full time. And he—I think he and Ivan got together, Ivan Karp.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And these two subsequent stars of dealer-dom got their starts at the Hansa Gallery, sharing a job, at which I'm sure they didn't make any money. I think they got paid \$25 a week.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Each, or they split \$25?

WOLF KAHN: I think they split it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That wasn't really much of anything in those days.

WOLF KAHN: No, no. Uh, but they very soon, uh, um, got the benefits. I'm sure they got good benefits from that job. They met a lot of people, and—

PAUL CUMMINGS: But, now, Walter Gutman used to hang around there. I remember him [inaudible].

WOLF KAHN: Well, Walter was a friend of—of Dody's, Dody Müller's.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: A friend of Dody's, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's always a pretty girl [ph] with the connection to Walter. [Laughs.]

WOLF KAHN: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, I don't remember the gallery downtown as much as I do uptown, for some reason.

WOLF KAHN: Well, it was right here at the corner. It's still standing, the building, but not for long. It looks like it's going to be torn down any day now.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, they've taken down part of it and the one behind it.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. Right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was it like, being involved with a gallery? [00:42:01] [Inaudible]—

WOLF KAHN: Well, it was—it was exciting, but at the same time, it was a pain in the neck, because, uh—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —because of the responsibility.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, and we had to go—you know, like the usual co-op gallery stuff. People wanted to be in the gallery, and we had spaces for them. And we could never agree. We figured nobody was good enough, you know. At one meeting—[they laugh] at one meeting, uh, uh, Felix got so disgusted, and he said, "You know, if Cézanne came here with his paintings, we'd vote him out." [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why do you—you know, it's fascinating, because you're implying that the—the choosing became more difficult, or more demanding, or—

WOLF KAHN: Well, because we were all into such different things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, you couldn't agree.

WOLF KAHN: And we couldn't agree on anybody.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm. What did you think about the 10th Street situation through the '50s? Because, you know, it became very lively, and lots of galleries.

WOLF KAHN: Well, we were always a little contemptuous of it. All the people who can participate in the 10th Street gallery would rather have been uptown.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Right. Well, but you got up there pretty soon.

WOLF KAHN: Well, I got up—the only reason I got up was because, um, I—I'd had all these jobs to support myself, and, um, uh, then I had a chance in 1955. I was invited, uh, by a wealthy lady, who had a hacienda in Mexico, to take care of her hacienda while she wasn't using it. And, uh, um, uh, I wouldn't have had to have a job. You see, I could paint full time. So it would have been the first time I could paint full time, aside from the summer.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's what got you to Mexico.

WOLF KAHN: So I went to Mexico then, and before I left Mex—left for Mexico, I said, Well, I'm not going to have a job. I'm not going to have the 15 bucks a month, which it takes to be a member of the Hansa Gallery. By that

time, it was quite expensive, you know. Fifteen dollars in those days was money.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative]. [00:44:00]

WOLF KAHN: And, um, you know, I got paid, I think, \$1.60 an hour. You know, \$15—

PAUL CUMMINGS: What were you doing then? I mean, [inaudible]—

WOLF KAHN: I was teaching—I was teaching, um, first in the Manhattanville Neighborhood Center, in Harlem, and then at Downtown Community School. I was a shop teacher.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Oh, yeah. That's where my friend studied with you.

WOLF KAHN: Oh, yeah? Who was that?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Josephine Stewart [ph], who now lives in California, married to an architect.

WOLF KAHN: Really? Huh. [Paul Cummings laughs.] You know what? I had all sorts of very interesting kids.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. How long—how many years were you there? Until—

WOLF KAHN: Two years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: I was two years at the Manhattanville Center. I had a black girlfriend then. I had all the credentials for being a good left-winger.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What happened to left wing life?

WOLF KAHN: Huh? Well, I did a little block busting. I got my black girl an apartment in lily-white Bank Street.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Before Pearl Bailey bought her house, [Paul Cummings laughs] Sarah [ph] was—Sarah was living on Bank Street already.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, terrific. So, well, you were painting, you were working at the schools, and—

WOLF KAHN: Mm-hmm [affirmative], and I had shows.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —and you had shows.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Every [inaudible]—

WOLF KAHN: And I was—I was very, uh, very well thought of in those days. I—I remember, um, de Kooning came to my show, my first show, and sent down, um—what was the guy's name? Ritchie, from the Modern.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, Andrew Ritchie.

WOLF KAHN: Because they had—they had shows upstairs in the penthouse—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yeah, I remember.

WOLF KAHN: —for the young talent.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. You were in one of those.

WOLF KAHN: And Ritchie—Ritchie didn't like it too much [inaudible].

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, but you were in one of those, weren't you?

WOLF KAHN: No, I wasn't.

PAUL CUMMINGS: One of those exhibitions? No.

WOLF KAHN: No, I was never in one of those. No. And then he sent [Charles] Egan down, because he thought

Egan might be interested in my work, because Egan had De Niro.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: And I think in de Kooning's mind, I was definitely, uh, one of the, uh—and de Kooning said to me, he said, "You know, I'm very envious of you," when he saw my show. [00:46:05] I met him on the street afterwards, because he had a studio right around the corner, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: Um, he said, "I'm very envious of you, because you managed to paint everyday life," which was a very interesting statement coming from de Kooning, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: From him, very interesting [ph].

WOLF KAHN: And that was before he exhibited the women, too.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right.

WOLF KAHN: You know, but he was clearly—you could see he was thinking in those kind of terms.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: So that was a thread, you know, from Hofmann's human content to de Kooning's everyday life.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And, uh, I was very—I was—a lot of people were very, uh, uh, excited by my first show. Fairfield liked it, and gave me a marvelous write up. In the first page of the *Art News*, you know, you could always tell where—where the biggies were, because—"our new shows," because they were always on the first page, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Right, right. Hmm. Well, that must have been very exciting.

WOLF KAHN: Yes, it was. Yes, it was. It really was. And I started right away selling a few things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: I think Meyer Schapiro sent people down. Tom sent somebody down.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And, um—yeah, I had a good start.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How are—well, you had a couple of shows at Hansa.

WOLF KAHN: Right. And the second show—the second show was, if anything, more successful than the first, because I sold quite a few things out of it. And, um, uh, by that time, people already knew my work from the Stable annuals, and so forth, and a lot of people came.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Those were very exciting shows, the Stable annuals.

WOLF KAHN: Uh-huh [affirmative], uh-huh [affirmative].

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why do you think that was? I mean, the people, or the organization, or the juxtaposition of—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, well, the dem—the—the democratic thing, you know, that the young upstarts like myself would hang next to Franz Kline or something like that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right.

WOLF KAHN: And then in the photographs. [00:48:00] I remember in the *Art News*, there was a photograph of just a wall. They took a whole wall. You know, and there—there we all were together. I think I was next to Gottlieb, or somebody like that, you know, who was already a very established person.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: And, uh, they talked about the artists as though we were all, um, of the same weight, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Which—which is very good, you know, because in the meantime, some terrible kind of hierarchical arrangement has—has—has interposed itself, and you no longer see anything like that, where it's—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, the business became so important. I mean, the money, and the investments, and—art became expensive.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. Yeah, and you no longer have any opportunity to see heavies and lightweights side by side.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, people are scared to do it.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You can't get curators to do it. And you can hardly get a critic to write about young and old, or big and little, or whatever the contrast, now. They're terrified of it.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, yeah. Well, it was—I mean, I'm sure you've heard this over and over again, but the art world was a community in those days. At least my part of it was.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, it was smaller. Yeah, but you knew people who were not just figurative painters, or, you know—

WOLF KAHN: Well, of course. We knew everybody.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was very diversified.

WOLF KAHN: We knew everybody, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. The Cedar Bar was around the corner.

WOLF KAHN: Right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: People drifted by there.

WOLF KAHN: Right. I mean, Fairfield, you know, was—and de Kooning were good friends, and Fairfield and I were good friends, and—and—and Franz Kline and I were good friends, and—and Felix Pasisis, and, uh, uh—and I was good friends, in those days, with Dickinson. You know, I mean, it was all—it was all like a very—you know, and Milton Avery and I were good friends, because through Emily, when—when I married her, you know. It was a sense of camaraderie, which has since, kind of, gone by the boards.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Changed, yeah. Where did you meet Emily, by the way?

WOLF KAHN: At the Artists' Club.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

WOLF KAHN: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You're kidding.

WOLF KAHN: Yes, sir. That's the only good thing that ever happened at the Artists' Club. [00:50:00] [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: I've never heard of that happening at the Artists' Club.

WOLF KAHN: Uh-huh [affirmative], sure. Well, you know, I'm sure—I'm sure there's quite a bit of fucking going on as a result of those evenings, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, but—but nothing much else came out of it.

WOLF KAHN: Well, I remember—I remember, for example, [Herman] Cherry.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: He used to come down, and always bring a girl that was too tall for him. Pretty girls, you know. And some guy would always come and take her away from under his nose, you know? [Paul Cummings laughs.] And then he'd have to spend the rest of his life not talking to this guy.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I know.

WOLF KAHN: [Cross talk] I know I was one of them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Finally, there was nobody left to talk to for him. [They laugh.]

WOLF KAHN: No, no. He—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, I know, but—

WOLF KAHN: He's—he's—you know, he's got many friends.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. But it did reduce his—

WOLF KAHN: Yes, yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. But there was a great deal of vitality around, and people seemed to be very adventuresome. I mean, nobody was making any money. Your exhibition was—obviously, you didn't produce enough for you to live on so you could stop teaching.

WOLF KAHN: No. No, the first exhibition that did that was in '56, when I went uptown with Grace Borgenicht.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And how did you come to meet her? Where did you [cross talk]?

WOLF KAHN: Well, when I came back from Mexico, I had nothing, see.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Which was what year now?

WOLF KAHN: 1955.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And, um, uh, in the meantime, while I was in Mexico, *Art News Annual* came out, um, in which Tom Hess had a thing called "Recent Directions in American Art," in which there was Rauschenberg, Rivers, Felix Pasilis, myself, uh, Helen Frankenthaler, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And, like, I was one of the—touted as being one of the comers.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And then another, uh, *Time*—no, no, that was later. Um, another *Art News Annual* came out the next year. It had a drawing of mine, illustrating a Richard Eberhart poem. You know, and so forth. And—and, uh, I guess—and then they had a big show at the Stable. [00:52:00]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Again, called *Recent Directions*, in which a painting of mine, a big painting, was—was exhibited, which was then reproduced in the *Times*, on the Sunday page. So I figured I was ready to try uptown, and I let it be known. I went to—I went to, uh—let's see. Who did I go to? Kootz, Martha Jackson, and as a backstop, I went to Borgenicht.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And, um, Martha Jackson liked my work, but John Hultberg was—was her, um, her darling.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: And, uh, uh, his wife had been my girlfriend.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Cross talk.] Really?

WOLF KAHN: So—so Hultberg—

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was a little too—yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Hultberg, uh, put a stop to that, because he still hated my guts. And, um, and Kootz was—he was playing with me. He couldn't make up his mind, you know. He didn't know whether he wanted to have anybody,

you know, representational in his gallery, and so forth.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: And so—so, uh, I'd left—so Borgenicht, I'd left some paintings at Borgenicht's. I left paintings in all those places. I had lots of paintings. [They laugh.] You know, I was fresh from Mexico.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: I came back with 30 paintings.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And I'd left some at Borgenicht, and she immediately sold them. She sold one to Roy Neuberger. She—I guess she—she decided she really wanted me in the gallery. She marshaled all her forces. And I didn't have a telephone up here. And, uh, I remember a telegraph—a telegram came, saying, um, sold such-and-such to so-and-so, and sold X to Y, and, uh, uh, gallery very excited, great things are in the offing, call me. You know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: So I call her, and she says, "Well, we really want you with the gallery. Uh, come up and we'll talk." So she took me out to lunch and feasted me, and gave me a drink, you know. [00:54:02]

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Cross talk], yeah.

WOLF KAHN: And then—then I forgot that I had thought of her as a backstop, and I really wanted to be with Kootz. I said, Gee, anybody who wants to do all that for me, I'd better go with, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: And Borgenicht was a reputable gallery. She still is.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: A good gallery.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Absolutely.

WOLF KAHN: And she had—in those days, it was Jimmy Brooks, and—and Baskin, and Avery, and—and these are all people, you know, with weight. And—and I figured it was just about the kind of company I'd like to keep, so I went with Borgenicht.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Cross talk] if Victor [ph] [inaudible] was there already.

WOLF KAHN: He still is, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, lots of people.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So 21 years of Grace Borgenicht.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. That's another seed [cross talk], [Paul Cummings laughs] you know, and no more changes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] But she's done rather well for you, though, over the years, hasn't she?

WOLF KAHN: Well, uh—

PAUL CUMMINGS: I mean, kept things going.

WOLF KAHN: She's kept things going. I've made a living. Ever since I went with her, I made a living from my work.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

WOLF KAHN: You know, I never had to take jobs.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's great.

WOLF KAHN: I took a job teaching. And then things started getting bad when I came back from Italy.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Because my style changed, you know, and these paintings didn't sell well.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Startled everybody, and that takes, uh—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. And they didn't sell well. And then, fortunately, I—by that time, I had a good enough reputation that I could apply to, uh, to—to the Guggenheim, and I got a grant, you know, when things were really hitting bottom then. And then I taught at Cooper, and I could always get more classes or less, but I was a good teacher, you know. Depending as [ph] I needed them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well—

[Audio Break.]

WOLF KAHN: —years. I—I—I really, you know, wasn't a very—wasn't what you would call a successful artist, although the first—first two shows at Grace's, I did very well. The first one I sold out altogether—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

WOLF KAHN: —before it was even on the wall.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's really extraordinary.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. Yeah, and it's on the basis of that, that I went to Italy to chase Emily.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative]. Why would—why? Had she gone there?

WOLF KAHN: Well, she—you see, I met her in the previous spring, before I went to Borgenicht. [00:56:02]

PAUL CUMMINGS: So that was '50—'55.

WOLF KAHN: '50—'56.

PAUL CUMMINGS: '56.

WOLF KAHN: Spring of '56.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And um, uh, I started going out with her. And then we decided to spend a summer together in Provincetown, but she had won a Fulbright, and she was about to go to Europe in the fall.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Uh-huh [affirmative], uh-huh [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You see? So I figured, well, we'd just have a good summer together, but then I fell in love with her. And, um, uh, then I didn't like the idea of her, you know, spending all of—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —wandering around by herself.

WOLF KAHN: With all those horny wops, and—

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Right?

WOLF KAHN: —all by herself. So as soon as I had my show, I had my opening, and the paintings were already all sold. I had \$8,000. Incredible. You know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Inaudible.]

WOLF KAHN: Right. I had—I had had nothing else, and I had \$8,000.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Good gosh, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: And that was a lot of money in those days.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was. It was.

WOLF KAHN: So I went to Italy.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: I went to—I had a big party the—the night of the opening, at which we had 300 people in here.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In here?

WOLF KAHN: In here. Three hundred people, including, uh, Frank O'Hara, who got so drunk that he couldn't make it down the stairs. I had to let him sleep overnight. [Paul Cummings laughs.] Uh, he was just one of many who had to sleep over.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. [Laughs.]

WOLF KAHN: And, uh, de Kooning was here. Kline was here.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Everybody.

WOLF KAHN: Everybody was here. And I had a band. David Amram played—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, God, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: —played with his jazz band.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. And we all danced this [ph]—it was tremendously—the best party I was ever at, and I gave it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, fantastic. [Inaudible] great.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, yeah. It cost me \$300, that party, because, you know, fantastic expenditure of money, but I felt that's what I needed to do in order to—to stay in good terms with everybody, because by then the word was around that [they laugh] I'd sold [inaudible].

PAUL CUMMINGS: You had to prove it, right? Oh, that's true. When did you start going to the Artists' Club?

WOLF KAHN: When I came back from, uh, Chicago.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, so that was, uh—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, in the early '50s.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —'51 or so, '52.

WOLF KAHN: '52, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who got you in?

WOLF KAHN: Well, I don't know. Jan was there. Felix. Those people, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative]. And they just said [inaudible] come along, yeah. [00:58:01]

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, I wasn't a member. We just, sort of, got past [inaudible] the servers at the gates.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Inaudible] and all those—yeah.

WOLF KAHN: But, I mean, I knew all these people.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: You know, Littlefield actually had been a Hofmann student, and he rather admired me, because Hofmann thought I was a, you know, promising young artist, so—

PAUL CUMMINGS: And he was always ready to help people.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. And Fred McDarrah, who became the doorman at one point. [Laughs.]

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. Right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Irving Sandler was around.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, yeah. I just had a letter from Irv today. He's going to reproduce four paintings in the book he's writing on the '50s.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, great.

WOLF KAHN: You know about his book on the '50s?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, sure, sure.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, terrific. I think that's great. Um, what did you think of the club? I mean, what—you know, what did it mean to you in those days, or did it have any meaning, or does it have a different one now?

WOLF KAHN: I don't know. I can't wax moist—moistly [Paul Cummings laughs] all over it, you know. And I—we used to get drunk there. We'd have fights. Uh, I remember, uh, seeing, um, Franz Kline kicking John Hultberg, uh, uh, in the back of his foot, because he was being nasty, and Hultberg having to be carried down the stairs because he broke his Achilles heel—his Achilles tendon.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: And I used to listen to the—to the, um, panels, with a certain amount of boredom, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: There were very few people—I mean, it was all entertainment. We—I don't think we were interested in ideas. You know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: We got our ideas from somewhere else. I don't quite know where.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, you know, it's interesting, because some—the club seems to have been totally different to every person. I mean, there's very little overlap.

WOLF KAHN: Hmm. But we went every Friday night, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Went to the Cedar all the time, too.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right.

WOLF KAHN: And yet we felt—everybody felt like an outsider.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

WOLF KAHN: The club had a big black cloud of hostility hanging over the whole—

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] [Inaudible] little black book?

WOLF KAHN: —yeah—over the whole proceeding. I—I used—I remember in '40—no, excuse me, in '54, Elaine de Kooning and I painted a portrait of Tom Hess. Tom sat for both of us at the same time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, fantastic.

WOLF KAHN: And, uh, um, uh, we decided—we were talking about who was an insider. [01:00:03]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You know? And I thought Elaine, surely, was the queen of us all, because everybody adored her, you know. And she said, "No, I'm an outsider, too." And I go [they laugh] the next time [ph] feeling—hunching up my shoulders.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So who—who were the—who were the insiders?

WOLF KAHN: There weren't any insiders. That's the thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: The club—the club managed to create such an atmosphere that there were no insiders. [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Not—the members didn't even belong.

WOLF KAHN: Nobody belonged. Right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. But it's funny—you know, [inaudible], I think, is a fascinating character, who people don't talk about very much. But I think as a—a provocative character—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. I remember [inaudible] came up to a—to me at a show of mine, and he said, um—no, it was Pavia. Excuse me. Pavia came up, and he says, "Why don't you move all your painting up a little bit, like six inches higher? Get rid of that little strip of sky. You'd be an abstract painter." [They laugh.] "It's the horizon that's holding you back," he said.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, no. What do you think—to finish on [inaudible], here. Um, what do you think it was about him that was so—so curious? Did you know him well? Because he—

WOLF KAHN: Well, he had a certain Egyptian quality.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, it's the way he looked at you—

WOLF KAHN: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —with funny [ph] eyes, right?

WOLF KAHN: Yes, that sort of—sort of—yeah, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But he was very smart.

WOLF KAHN: Yes, he was. But I never—I never got close to him.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No?

WOLF KAHN: And I never—I guess I was, essentially, not very curious, because, you know—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, they were all so [ph] aggressive and tough.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. Yeah, I—I always, sort of, felt—well, he was, like, Cerberus at the gate.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Who takes an interest—I mean, I'm interested in getting to Hades. I don't want to go—worry about Cerberus.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] That's true. I mean, he would like that image, too. [Laughs.]

WOLF KAHN: Yes, yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Snapping at everybody.

WOLF KAHN: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But they made it—um, I think they were very aware—or if they weren't, they really made their generation difference apparent.

WOLF KAHN: Oh, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You know, I mean, you knew they were older, and you were younger, and if you sat there and listened, it was fine, and if you got too snippy or something, they'd—

WOLF KAHN: Well, that's where Franz Kline was great. He wasn't like that at all.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No?

WOLF KAHN: No. He was a genuine democrat, [Paul Cummings laughs] as Felix would say.

PAUL CUMMINGS: A genuine democrat?

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Okay, great. [Inaudible] [01:02:00]

[END OF TRACK AAA_kahn_77_4707.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: —16th of January 1978. This is side three, Paul Cummings talking to Wolf Kahn in his studio at 813 Broadway.

WOLF KAHN: Well, and [inaudible].

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was Frank O'Hara.

WOLF KAHN: It was Frank O'Hara. [They laugh.] And he had to—he had to stay the night, because he couldn't make it down the stairs.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, [cross talk].

WOLF KAHN: Which are very [inaudible], you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: He took one look at those stairs, and he came charging back up.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] And he couldn't do it.

WOLF KAHN: Couldn't face it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was a great party. Have you given a party like that subsequently? I mean, was that—that was—

WOLF KAHN: No. That was the high point of my bohemian existence.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Once was enough.

WOLF KAHN: No, I just—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

WOLF KAHN: —uh, I came—the next thing that happened to me is I got married, you know. I went off to Italy, and—and I came back with a wife, with Emily.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who you had met before, though, right? And he she had gone off on a grant, or—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, yeah. Right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did—yeah.

WOLF KAHN: I met her in Provincetown, and we lived together that summer. And, um, that was a great summer, incidentally. Did I talk about that summer?

PAUL CUMMINGS: What year was that?

WOLF KAHN: That was fif—no, that was '50—the summer of '56.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So the show was in '56. That must have been in the fall, right?

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, yeah. No, the show was around—I think it opened on the fourth of December.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, at the end of the year.

WOLF KAHN: And I embarked to chase Emily into Italy on the eighth of December. In other words, I made a quick getaway before—before people, uh, um, um, you know, could—could shoot me down for having had a success.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right. Which was not the proper thing to happen in those days.

WOLF KAHN: Which wasn't the proper thing in those days at all.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why do you think that was? Just because it was—

WOLF KAHN: Well, because all—it was very simple. Because all the people who we respected hadn't had any, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: It was, uh, um—when they were young, there were so many people around whom we respected who—who hadn't started to make it even then, you know, in '56. [00:02:04]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right.

WOLF KAHN: And, uh, um, uh, and all—none of—none of the ones who already had a success had had a success when they were young.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: De Kooning got his success late. Mondrian got his success late. Uh, um, Kandinsky even got his success—I mean, art history is—was—was replete with examples. Very—I mean, in—in the history of modern art.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. It was just [cross talk].

WOLF KAHN: [Cross talk] very rare that anybody started making money early.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And in America, of course, where this was this double confusion about commercial success and, uh, quality, which were sensed to be diametrically opposed to each other. [Laughs.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Do you think that's still true?

WOLF KAHN: Oh, I—I haven't figured out this moment. I haven't figured out this moment.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You don't worry about that.

WOLF KAHN: But I must say, I get a lot of satisfaction from the fact that I'm successful.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah?

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It keeps things going, and—

WOLF KAHN: Well, it just—it—it's—it seems to be—like, this moment, uh, the thing is switched around 180 degrees, and you almost feel that you—you get your, um, justification by the fact that—that—that you get—make money, and get play in the press, and so forth. You know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Because you really don't know too many people who are, uh—who you think are good, who are not getting it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

WOLF KAHN: Do you know anybody?

PAUL CUMMINGS: No, that's true. But some people are good who don't—for maybe personality reasons or

quirks, don't have a good [inaudible].

WOLF KAHN: Well, the last—the last example that—that I was very involved in was, of course, Alice Mason, Alice Trumbull Mason, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah. [00:04:00]

WOLF KAHN: But she was a raging alcoholic, and nobody could deal with her, including me. It was a [inaudible].

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right.

WOLF KAHN: Um, but, uh, I—I think in—it's a very different moment from—from—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —twenty years ago.

WOLF KAHN: I mean, in these 20 years, some—some tremendous round—roundabout turn has happened, either in the world or else in my consciousness, and I have a feeling that I'm only reflecting what's—what's really in the air.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Um, people almost take it for granted that if they haven't heard your name, you can't be any good.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: You know, as you go out into the art world.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, that's true.

WOLF KAHN: And—and, uh, I don't think that was the—that was that way, uh, 20 years ago, because there were too many examples of—of new people who'd been around a long time, who nobody had ever heard of before.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, there wasn't [ph] also the gallery, dealer, curator, critic, historian, magazine structure.

WOLF KAHN: Well, it—it certainly wasn't as heavily seeded. I mean, it wasn't as dense, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: As now.

WOLF KAHN: As now.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Sure. But, you know, going—going back to your, uh, trip. You went off to Italy, right?

WOLF KAHN: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: After—

WOLF KAHN: Well, no, let me tell you about that summer.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: I forgot to tell you.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, that's right, the summer.

WOLF KAHN: That summer, I met, like—through Emily, who had been good friends of their family, I met the Averys. And I spent a lot of time with Milton.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh.

WOLF KAHN: And he had, I think, a very salutary effect on me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really? In what way?

WOLF KAHN: He drove a lot of this shit out of my mind.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of shit?

WOLF KAHN: Uh, this business that the artist has to be unhappy, that he has to, uh, suffer, that—that—that you can't lead a normal life and be an artist, and so forth. Because he's a person who, um, uh, was nice. [00:06:00]

He was quiet. He was—he wasn't pushy. He wasn't particularly interesting as a personality, you know. He only became interesting as you got to know him, really.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And you found out what—what quiet reserves of humor, and—and, um, appreciation of things he had.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But he had Sally, who was, sort of, a little bird that jumped around and talked, and did all—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, but she couldn't—she couldn't have done anything if he didn't have the goods, too, somehow, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. That's true. That's true, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Or if he disappointed the expectations that she raised, which he invariably didn't do. He really was a, [Paul Cummings laughs] you know, quite a fantastic guy. But he lived—I mean, they always lived a very agreeable life.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And, uh, they—they, sort of, felt that it's hard enough to be an artist, uh, without—without looking to live in garrets, and looking to—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —having a terrible life.

WOLF KAHN: —to have a terrible life.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: So—so you went to the most pleasant places you could, and lived as well as you could.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And it didn't hurt—it certainly didn't hurt his work, you know. And I went out with him, and—painting.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

WOLF KAHN: We went—went to, um, to a—we did a whole series of—of pictures side by side in Pamet [River], in Truro [Massachusetts].

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But he did watercolors, usually, then, didn't he—

WOLF KAHN: Uh, he did oil—oils on paper—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —or drawing?

WOLF KAHN: No, outside he did mostly drawings, and then he—he had a whole system, you know. He did stuff outside. Then he took it in—inside, and transferred into watercolor, and then finally he made a painting, you know, from that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I thought the watercolors were done outside sometimes. So it was a drawing first, then the watercolor, then the painting.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. He made drawings with color indications, or sometimes not even that. He carried around with him a little book. It wasn't even a book. It was just sheets of paper that were, sort of—sort of, uh, clip—on a clipboard. And made—made felt tip—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right. [00:08:00]

WOLF KAHN: —pen drawings. Very fast, without any particular care, you know, that they would be works of art. They were notations.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Kind of, a little [inaudible] sketch, you know?

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: And uh, he—I know he made a series of—of me painting. I had an outdoor easel, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And I had it set up on top of a dune, and he had me standing on the dune painting, you know, [they laugh] with one of those long, narrow pictures.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And I was in the middle, and the picture stuck out on either side of me like a crucifix. [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Now there's a lot of imagery somebody can work off [ph].

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, yeah. But he was—I mean, you know, he's, like, one of those—those people who jolted my, uh—

PAUL CUMMINGS: But what other—you know, what other examples are there of his influence on you? I mean, besides—

WOLF KAHN: Well, Hofmann, of course, had a great influence on me. He also was a person who always liked to live well.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right.

WOLF KAHN: Wasn't at all involved in being a bohemian.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. He always dressed well, looked elegant.

WOLF KAHN: Well, I wouldn't say that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No, but he always looked—

WOLF KAHN: You know, he looked like a German tourist.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Wearing his—wearing his heavy sandals and—

PAUL CUMMINGS: But I mean, he didn't look like somebody who was always—I mean, at least in New York, where I knew him.

WOLF KAHN: Yes. No, he was a—he had a feeling that he was—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: I mean, he was—he was genuinely a great man, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Tremendous insights into life.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But what—what—

WOLF KAHN: Very, very sharp.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hofmann, you're talking about.

WOLF KAHN: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. But what about Avery? I mean, what was it like to go out painting with him? Because you hadn't done that with anybody, had you, when you [inaudible]?

WOLF KAHN: Yes, I went out painting a lot with Lester Johnson.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. Lester was—didn't I mention Lester earlier?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, briefly, but not that you went painting with him.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, yeah. We went out painting together.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Whereabouts?

WOLF KAHN: Oh, in the, um, uh—you know where—where, um, Co-op City now stands?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah?

WOLF KAHN: Over in there. [Laughs.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. We used to go over and do, uh, uh, swamps, and bridges, and things like that. [00:10:05] And this was way early. This was around 1950, [inaudible] '51.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I didn't know that.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really? So all that scenery's gone. I mean, they're not—[inaudible] buildings—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. And then I went out—then I used to go out painting and drawing with Jan, Jan Müller. I always liked to go with people, you know. It's a lot of fun. [Paul Cummings laughs.] Even now, I go out with Frank Stout, up in Vermont.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

WOLF KAHN: We go out a lot together, yeah. And, uh, I'm going to go up next—next spring. I've gotten friendly with Jim Dine, and he's—he wants to do landscape, all of a sudden, you know. He's into, uh, rediscovering on his own terms the old tradition of painting. He's painting still lifes now, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: After the nudes—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —he's been doing still lifes. Well, he always had a certain still life [inaudible].

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, but now he's really painting it in a, sort of, a painterly way. He's all involved in Morandi and people like that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Objects on a tabletop, then?

WOLF KAHN: Objects on a table. He's got them—his whole—whole bedroom in—in his hotel, where's painting now.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Inaudible.]

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. It's full of still life objects.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

WOLF KAHN: In fact, I lent him a couple.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you lend him?

WOLF KAHN: A [inaudible] teapot.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: And, uh, um—well, actually, the next one I'm going to lend him, it's—it's this thing here.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's, um—what do you call it? Um—

WOLF KAHN: Sheet metal work, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, but it's a—

WOLF KAHN: Tin. Tinware.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But it's a cream can, or a—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, that's right. That's right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —little tabletop cream [inaudible].

WOLF KAHN: But it's a nice object.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, fantastic. Right out of Morandi.

WOLF KAHN: Well, actually, it's got a—Morandi is more elegant. This has got a, kind of, American clumsiness that—I don't think this object would have pleased Morandi, really.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He would have put it so you could only see the handle or something.

WOLF KAHN: The color of it's nice. Yeah, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's marvelous. [00:12:00] I like that.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. So anyway, you know, I mean, uh, it's—

PAUL CUMMINGS: But then you stayed friend with Avery for the last, what, few years of his life [inaudible].

WOLF KAHN: Oh, yeah. And I'm still very friendly with Sally. And every time I make, like, a life move of any kind, like consider changing galleries or anything like that, I always talk with Sally, because I have a feeling, of all the people around, she's got the—the—the most perfect grasp on reality, in a rather tough way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's true. Yeah. She smiles, but boy, underneath that, is—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —straight—straight line. Absolutely.

WOLF KAHN: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What other things happened that summer? I mean, you've got—

WOLF KAHN: Oh, uh, well, I started selling a few things out of my studio.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: There was a collector named Horace Richter. I think I mentioned him. Did I mention him on the other tape?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yeah. Whatever happened to him? No.

WOLF KAHN: He's now a dealer. He's a very rich man [inaudible].

PAUL CUMMINGS: He's a dealer now?

WOLF KAHN: He's a dealer in Israel, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I wondered what happened to him.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, and he wants me to come over there and paint landscape in Israel. Uh, but—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Because he used to be here on Madison Avenue or something, and a different kind of business, wasn't he?

WOLF KAHN: He was in the shirt—

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's right, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: —in—in ladies' underwear or something.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Something like that, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. And his father was the peach king.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

WOLF KAHN: Yes. He—he controlled the peach harvest from North Carolina, South Carolina, all the way up to New Jersey.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, fantastic. [Laughs.]

WOLF KAHN: He used to—he used—he was a Southerner with a Jewish accent, so his accent was atrocious. It was a Southern accent with Jewish overtones, which—which is impossible for me to—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hard to make up. I mean—[laughs].

WOLF KAHN: His name was Moses Richter. And he used to say—once, I met him at Horace's house, and he—he, uh, said [speaks with mix of Southern and Jewish accent], "I don't know who's crazier, the people that paints the paintings, or the people that buys them." [00:14:07] [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, how amazing. But, what, Richter's gone to Israel, then?

WOLF KAHN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

PAUL CUMMINGS: I didn't know that. He just disappeared.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. But, um, he was very heavily into collecting the group of which I was a part. He has a lot of Jan Müllers, and Richard Stankiewicz, and, um, uh, I led him to Lee Bontecou. He bought—bought some things of hers.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm. And where did you find her?

WOLF KAHN: I met her in Italy. She had a Fulbright at the same time that Emily did.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I see. Now, what happened in Italy? That's—

WOLF KAHN: Well, in Italy, I got married.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And, um, my style changed.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you were living where?

WOLF KAHN: Living in Venice.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In Venice. Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Yes. We had a beautiful place overlooking the maritime passage between Venice and the Giudecca. We lived on the Giudecca. And my—my painting became empty, you know. It started out being, at that time, sort of, you know, very expressionist and bright, with—with some [inaudible] overtones.

PAUL CUMMINGS: A little bit [cross talk]. Yeah, it's like the painting that was here, then.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: And, um, uh, in—I got more and more interested in being a, sort of, an overall painter of—of almost—I think my—the big influence at that time on me, really, was Guston.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

WOLF KAHN: Yes. And, um, my paintings became gray, and—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], because he was then doing the abstract—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. Right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —grid thing. Yeah. But you never got away from the image, even in those.

WOLF KAHN: No, I never got away from the image. I always—then I painted land—exclusively landscape. I got away from painting the figure. Toward the end of my stay in Italy, I wasn't painting the figure at all anymore.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why was that? It wasn't there, or you didn't—

WOLF KAHN: It didn't—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —work anymore? [00:16:00]

WOLF KAHN: —fit in anymore. I, um, I have a story. Very funny. Uh, uh, actually, that was in my second s—I—I kept on trying to reintroduce the figure.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And in my second stay in Italy, this story goes—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Which was later, right?

WOLF KAHN: This was in '63.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Um, I was very broke, and I had this huge painting that I had been working on all summer long, which was based on a, um, um, a painting by Van Gogh, where—where he's walking down an avenue, carrying his easel and his canvas.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: You know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. A famous painting, right.

WOLF KAHN: Yes. And I—I think, uh, Bacon made—made some—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right.

WOLF KAHN: —some strike-offs from it, too. And I was—instead of going down this avenue, I was going down this path, which led from our house into a whole series of olive orchards. And the path had cypresses and olive trees along the side of it. And very heavy blue sky, I had in it. And I—there was this little figure carrying a canvas under his arm, and—[they laugh] and a box of paints in the other. And that was me, a la Van Gogh, with a hat. You know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right.

WOLF KAHN: And I couldn't make that painting work. Oh, I changed the scale of the figure. I changed the scale of the trees. I—I—over and over again. So one day, Jack Zajac, who is a very fine sculptor, who was working in Rome—terrific guy, too.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: He sounds—sounds like—like, uh, Jimmy Stewart.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], yeah, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: And he's got sort of, like, a—a—uh—[they laugh] and anything you say to him, you know, "I like your work, Jack," he says [imitates Jimmy Stewart], "Gee, thanks." You know? [They laugh].

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: And he's got—got a hair hanging into his eyes. He's really, sort of, like *Mr. Smith Goes to*

Washington. But he brought a fellow named [A. Alfred] Taubman, who built—the big rich guy from the Middle West who—[00:18:07]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, the supermarket guy.

WOLF KAHN: —made his money—yeah, you know him.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, yeah, Albert [sic] Taubman.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. He brought him over. And we were practically broke.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And I—and this guy, Taubman, was supposed to buy one of my paintings.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And I brought out this big painting, and—and he loved it. And he said, um, he said, "Well, uh," he said, "I want this painting." I said, "Well, Mr. Taubman, I'm sorry. You can't have it, because, um, it's not done."

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And, uh, and then, uh, he said, "Well, when it's done, how much is it going to be?" And I said it would be \$1000 or \$1200, something like that. And—and he said, "Well, let me give you the money ahead of time, and when you've got it finished, you just send it to me in St. Louis," or something. Or Kansas City. I don't know where he is.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Michigan or somewhere.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. And, uh, and I said, "Oh, gee, I can't do that, because that would inhibit me in working on the painting."

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: And meantime, you should have seen the grimaces that—that—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —[laughs] are going on behind you.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. Jack—Jack Zajac, you know, he's going like this, you know, [they laugh] [inaudible], you know. What a schlonk. I really didn't—I did not have—I didn't have a pot to piss in the moment, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: But, uh, I was so screwed up over that painting. And so what I finally did with this painting is, I painted out the figure, and it just became a straight landscape.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And, like, I—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did he ever get the painting?

WOLF KAHN: He never got—I still have it in—out front.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's still here?

WOLF KAHN: I'll show it to you. Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did he—but did he buy something else?

WOLF KAHN: He bought a smaller painting. He—he, uh—you know, so I did have some money.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So something happened, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Something happened. I think a \$200 painting, he bought, you know. Kept me going for a couple of weeks. [00:20:00] [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, dear. But, um, how did you like living in—in, uh, in Venice?

WOLF KAHN: In Venice? Oh, it's great. It's a beautiful city.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you think it affected your work? I mean, did it—

WOLF KAHN: Well, it had a terrific effect, in the sense that it's—for the first time, I discovered a peculiar light. I mean, you might say a—a—a local kind of light.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Which I tried very hard to, um—to, um, capture.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: What they call this [inaudible] of Venice, you know. There's always, like, a little—little bit of a—of a haze in the summertime.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And this crept into all my work. And it really, sort of—sort of, prepared—got me into, um, you know, painting the way I painted the subsequent 10 years after that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And I sent those paintings back to Grace, and she had a hell of a time with them. She didn't like them particularly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Or maybe she even—I'm being unjust. She might have liked them, but—but her clientele didn't like them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But her clientele or something [ph]—yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, and they were very disappointed in them. And the show that I subsequently had when I came back, I think I sold three paintings out of it, you know, mostly to friends. [Laughs.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], yeah.

WOLF KAHN: It was a whole different story from—but Grace, I think, got to like them very much, and she herself bought one from the show and hung it in her house. Subsequently, I don't know if it didn't wear well, or she could spare it, but it's now in the Brooklyn Museum. I think she got rid of it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm. Oh, that's—it went to a nice place, anyway.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What—what was it that intrigued you about staying in Venice? Because you spent a lot of time there.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, we—well, we had this terrific studio in an old palazzo, the—the, uh, ballroom of—of this old palazzo. [00:22:00]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And, uh, uh, the light was just—just so incredible. And it was—it was new every day. It was different. It was—it was strange. It was very peculiar light. I mean, it was the first time I was in a place where I really felt I understood the light. I mean, in Provincetown, I used to paint whatever, you know, came into my head, and, sort of, let the light—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —happen.

WOLF KAHN: —take care of itself. And I suppose, in some of the pictures, I got a certain kind of brilliance, you know, that you associate with Provincetown. But I wasn't as conscious of it as I was in—in Venice, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: I really became very conscious of the particular light that there was there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were there other Americans there that you knew, or were you, sort of, by yourself, or what kind of social world was there?

WOLF KAHN: Uh, oh, I moved, um, with art historians, and, uh, I—Roy Fisher was there at the time. Do you know Roy?

PAUL CUMMINGS: I never met him.

WOLF KAHN: He's the house art historian at Wildenstein [& Company] now. And a guy named, um, um, Fred Hartt. He was there. He's an art historian, quite a well-known one, I think at Washington U. in St. Louis.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And, um, and then I mostly moved in the circle of Italian artists, Vedova, and Santomaso, and, uh, uh, the whole Venetian group.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You know, they—they were quite—quite—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —around?

WOLF KAHN: —friendly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did you learn some Italian?

WOLF KAHN: Oh, yes. I got to speak Italian as well as I speak English. In fact, I learned to speak Venetian. It's quite esoteric, you know. [Paul Cummings laughs.] It's a language all to itself.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, fantastic.

WOLF KAHN: Sure. And I know—I—I had my own gondola—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: —which I bought for 25 bucks.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You're kidding.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, and local unemployables fixed it up for me, and—and taught me how to row it. [00:24:03]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah?

WOLF KAHN: I have great stories on how, uh, uh, you know, I got, uh—I fooled gondoliers into thinking I was a typical tourist, you know, and I'd fall in the water. And they got me to climb up on the prow, and gave—handed—very carefully handed the thing, you know, and I'd make—make the gondola go round and round and round, as though I didn't know where I was going, you know. [Paul Cummings laughs.] And all of a sudden, like when the thing was going—heading in the right direction, I'd start leaning into the oar, and make it go like an arrow, you know. [Paul Cummings laughs.] And the gondolier is just standing there and looking at me. Wow. I got to be quite an expert. Oh, Venice was a lot of fun. And then my—my best friend in Venice was, um, the son of—of probably the largest collector, at that time, in Venice, named—he's Avvocato Giovanni Brass [ph], who has this huge collection of—of very fine Renaissance and Baroque paintings.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: And the son was a, um, a film enthusiast, and he finally became a film director in Italy.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What's his name?

WOLF KAHN: His name is Tinto Brass. He made a movie called *Chi lavora è perduto*. He's a sort of anarchist. And

then, um, uh, *Black on White* was a movie that was—they're all—they're all on the edge of pornography.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm. Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. But he was a wonderful guy. And he was—under—understood Venice. He was friendly with all the—the famous winners of the regatta, you know, and all that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: I mean, he really laid out Venice for us [Paul Cummings laughs] like a—with a—with a red carpet.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you find him?

WOLF KAHN: I don't know. In Venice—Venice isn't a big town, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. So you meet people.

WOLF KAHN: You meet people.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, Peggy Guggenheim was there then, wasn't she?

WOLF KAHN: I—I was friendly with Peggy. [00:26:00] She was, sort of—especially in the wintertime, when Peggy, you know—Venice is a very funny place, because the [inaudible], sort of, throws Venice into a tizzy and makes it lose—lose its sense of being a backwater.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You know, for, like, every two years, Venice thinks it's the art capital of the world.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Basically, it's a very provincial town.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right.

WOLF KAHN: So—so, uh, people behave atrociously, you know, because they're—they're having all these celebrities in town, and they forget their normal friends, you know. [They laugh.] So you have to make allowances for that. But in the wintertime, I saw a lot of Peggy.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Because it's quiet.

WOLF KAHN: Because there's nobody else there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Nobody's there.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was she like in those days, in the [inaudible]?

WOLF KAHN: Probably the same way as always—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —she's always been, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: She's always a bit of a bitch. But, um, underneath, you have a sort of a feeling she's a *heimish* Jewish lady, you know, who—who, uh, uh, has her feet on the ground.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah. Did she like your work?

WOLF KAHN: No.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Didn't?

WOLF KAHN: No. Meant—meant nothing to her.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

WOLF KAHN: She thought she could—in fact, in Italy, nobody could understand what I was into. They all felt that an American painter should be doing something totally different. You know, in Italy in 1958, who their favorite American painter was? Ben Shahn.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Absolutely. They—they felt that that was American art. Then the next time I went there, their favorite American painter was Andy Warhol, which was only four years later.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] But it's fascinating. They liked flat graphic images, then. I mean, there is this odd similarity between the early Warhol and, kind of, Shahn.

WOLF KAHN: I mean, they—no, I think they had pre—preconceptions about what—what America was about.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: And in each instance, uh, uh, uh, either positively or negatively, the artist fit into it, you see? They all prepared for Ben Shahn, because they mostly—you know, the intellectual in Italy is almost invariably a Communist. [00:28:06]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right. So they all knew him.

WOLF KAHN: And they all knew him, and his messages, and so forth.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Hmm. You never showed in Italy or anything, did you?

WOLF KAHN: No.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Not the—they really didn't—

WOLF KAHN: Well, I showed in the Fulbright group shows, you know, and so forth.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, but I mean, never with a dealer or anything.

WOLF KAHN: No. No, no, in Italy, they didn't und—I sometimes used to take my work around, as an exercise in masochism, but it was invariably just that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. No—no response?

WOLF KAHN: No response.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

WOLF KAHN: No, no. The foreign—well, the younger people sometimes liked my work, you know, the artists.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What about the Italian—yeah, what about the Italian artists? What did they think?

WOLF KAHN: They sometimes—they liked my work, some of them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You know, strange people, like—like—maybe, uh, somebody like, uh, [inaudible], or, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

WOLF KAHN: It was these—these—these crazy, uh, uh, uh, modern guys who had a, sort of, a sense. And Vedova, kind of, liked my work.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And I actually made a trade with a painter named Guidi. He was a Venetian painter.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I don't know him, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: He was quite well known in Italy. He liked my work.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: And a lot of the kids liked my work, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But do you think that was a—um, you know, based on what you said before, one thinks that there was a certain maturing that took place there in your work. Do you think that happened, and a, sort of, sorting out of things, [inaudible] color and the light?

WOLF KAHN: Well, I was very—I was very aware of the fact that my work was terribly reminiscent of a whole lot of other people.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm. In terms of what?

WOLF KAHN: Well, you know, people said Bonnard.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see.

WOLF KAHN: People said Kokoschka, you know, for my early work.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And, uh, uh, I think—I think that got to me after a while, and I, sort of, felt—I, sort of, felt, well, now I'm old enough. [00:30:02] It's about time for me to do my own thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: But it ended up that I just went from one influence to another, and I got influenced more by the Impressionists, and then became a, sort of, a, you know, latter-day Impressionist. But within—within that, um, once I—I decided—you know, I mean, I think for me, true maturity came when I no longer gave a shit either way, [laughs] you know, who I was influenced by, and what it looked like, and so forth.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When—when did that happen, do you think?

WOLF KAHN: Over the years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: You know, I mean, I don't think you can say it hap—you know, I mean, it just happened when I became a little more certain of myself.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And, um, uh, and then saw many examples, such as Gorky, who—who clearly wasn't afraid to be influenced. And I got to know de Kooning better in New York, and he clearly hadn't ever been afraid to be influenced.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Uh, so—so, uh, it just seemed to me that, um, it's not the kind of siren voices to which you listen, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How—you know, I was just going to ask you almost that. How do you recognize your influences? I mean, were they—at the time [ph]—

WOLF KAHN: Oh, everybody knows those.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, but I mean—well, did it come from, you know, say, looking at Bonnard's at the Modern, or something, and—

WOLF KAHN: Well, no. I don't think you do it quite like that. I mean, I had a talk once with Allan Kaprow, who was a close friend of mine.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: And we went all through high school together. We really—I mean—I think, in a way, I had a greater influence on him than he had on me, because for a while, he just, sort of, followed in my footsteps.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He was your follower, right, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. And then, uh, when he went off to do his own thing, you know, which was very wise of him to do, because as a painter, I don't think he ever would have amounted to anything, you know. And the reason was, uh, that he was much too aware. [00:32:04] He was terribly self-conscious about everything he did.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: He—he told me once than he could tell where each brush stroke came from that he put down.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, God, that—

WOLF KAHN: You know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. You mean in terms of other art, or—

WOLF KAHN: In terms of other art, yeah. And that that—that took a lot of the pleasure out of it. And I've never had that problem. I mean, that's almost—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: —you know, that really would spoil the fun.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Um, I can, in retrospect, look at paintings and see where certain ideas might have conceivably arisen, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But so you were just reacting to things that you liked.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You know, when it appeared in your work one way or another.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, I think so. And now, of course, I think I'm most influenced by myself, you know. I mean, that's the most pernicious influence that there is. You know, I mean, that happens to every artist after a certain number of paintings. After you've done 2000 paintings, I suppose, uh, it gets to be that you start thinking about all—all the paintings you've already made, you know, rather than—

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's interesting, because I was [inaudible], and that was years ago. And he said almost the same thing, where the artist has to become wary of his own style—

WOLF KAHN: Oh, sure.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —because he starts polishing his own style based on what he did before.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It becomes a—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, you get to be your own expert, you know, an expert on—I'm the greatest expert on Wolf Kahn, you know? [Paul Cummings laughs.] I know every move he makes. [They laugh.] And, of course, that also takes a lot of the fun out of it, because I think one of the things about being an artist that's terrific is that it offers you—or should offer you—a constant source for self-renewal, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, that's what he said. People can get so involved with that success, and that kind of style, that they won't fall on their face and start up, or pick up, or make a mistake again. [00:34:05]

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, yeah. Well, that's why it's, kind of, admirable, like what Dine is doing now, painting still life after—in fact, I told him. I said, "Jim," you know, when I saw those figure drawings, "it's—it's really, kind of, admirable. You're like a general who yanks the epaulettes off his own shoulders, you know. Now you're all of a sudden a soldier in the ranks when you're making figure drawings."

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, it is—it's sure, you know. Well, I think it's also a case where he got to the point where the style was so taut and tense and tight.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. Well, he got to be extremely expert at being Jim Dine.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. When you were in Venice, was—did you look at old art? I mean, go around and see the collections, and—

WOLF KAHN: Oh, yes, sure.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —things, you know?

WOLF KAHN: I was always interested—I've always been interested in—in—in painting, you know, historical painting.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Not in the way that Dine is, or in the way that Larry Rivers was, or in the way that Louis Finkelstein is, you know, to go—to go, uh, use it for intellectual validation of ideas that you already have.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How [cross talk]?

WOLF KAHN: Even to derive—to derive your intellectual ideas from painting, you know. I always—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [Cross talk] your interest [ph], yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Well, I—I try to derive them from nature, you know, or maybe from a tube of paint.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But I mean the—your interest in old—other paintings? Just as pleasure, or—

WOLF KAHN: I have a tendency. I sometimes look at myself, and I say, you know, I—I do the same thing now as I do in reading. I go to a museum for entertainment. [Laughs.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You know, just to be—just to be made happy. You know, I mean, art still has the capacity to—to do that for me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: But, um, I don't think I try to, um, uh, consciously, uh, steal from anybody, or learn tricks, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: I go—I go to have insights, but, sort of, the way you would, you know? [00:36:01]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative]. How long did you spend in Italy that first time?

WOLF KAHN: Two years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Two years?

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: From '60—

WOLF KAHN: From—from, uh, '57 until '59.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: All in Venice? No. There's [cross talk].

WOLF KAHN: No, we lived in two other places. We lived in Spoleto one winter, and, um, uh—no, it's—it's just Venice and Spoleto. Yeah, and we lived a little while in Rome. We visited there, but not really.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you pick Spoleto?

WOLF KAHN: Because Louis Finkelstein was there, and—and, uh, he found a house for us.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, you knew him already?

WOLF KAHN: Oh, yeah. Louis and—and I had been old friends.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Sure.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where did you meet him?

WOLF KAHN: I don't know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He's—he's been—

WOLF KAHN: That goes—that goes into—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —here forever. [Laughs.]

WOLF KAHN: —into the Dark Ages, you know. I think he once wrote an article, or something like that, in which he—you know, way, way back in the early '50s.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: But, you know, the art world was very small then. Everybody knew each other, practically.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, that's true. But didn't you miss the New York life, the New York contact, the—the milieu that you'd been in for a while?

WOLF KAHN: I suppose I did, but I had a new milieu. I mean, I was, you know, living with a very beautiful young girl, and—in a new—in a new, uh, totally new surroundings, making new friends, learning the language, uh, and painting. You know, I—I—I was old enough to paint on my own without needing—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right.

WOLF KAHN: —needing to have people painting, uh, you know, on all sides of me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Or having shows, and so forth. And I had a gallery, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: I could send all my work back to New York, if I liked it well enough to do so.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Did she sell much for you during the years you were there, or not?

WOLF KAHN: She continued to sell, yeah, because while I was away, a whole lot of stuff happened. Um, a color reproduction appeared in *Time* magazine, together with Helen Frankenthaler, and Jan Müller, and who else? [00:38:08] A couple—it was, yeah, younger artists that are worthy of notice, and so forth. And then the museums, you know, once—I think the museums, that's all they read, is *Time* magazine, [Paul Cummings laughs], because they—

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Cross talk] go to studios [cross talk].

WOLF KAHN: —they started—they started going—coming around to the gallery in droves. I—I think that was my high point, is after that magazine article came out. I got to be, like, the great white hope of American painting.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And I sold pictures to, uh, a Virginia museum, the Houston museum, the, uh, City Art Museum in—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —St. Louis.

WOLF KAHN: —St. Louis, the University of Illinois museum, whatever it's called.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The Krannert, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. And—and I mean, you know, it's—

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Cross talk] with all kinds of—

WOLF KAHN: The Whitney. Um, I guess that was, like, the ultimate validation, you know. I mean, Tom Hess had already written about me, but when *Time* mag came through, boy, oh boy, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Then it all became real.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, yeah. Then—so she continued. She'd send—sent checks.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: It was okay.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's [inaudible]. Why did you come back? What was the reason to—

WOLF KAHN: Well, I didn't—I felt—I felt, uh, uh, that I didn't have the makings of an expatriate. And I also felt that, um, I—I began to—to feel that I'd like to be part of a, um, of an art world again, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: In Venice [inaudible] any such thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. But how did you like going back to Europe? Because that was your first trip back since the war, was it not?

WOLF KAHN: Oh, well, yeah, but it was totally different. I mean, I went to a friendly country under nice auspices, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: I didn't go to Germany. [00:40:00] I had an opportunity to go to Germany, and I didn't go back.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: I went—I went, um, to the railway station. We were invited to stay in Munich with a man named Richard Holm, who was the first tenor at the Munich Opera, a friend of my father's. And, um, uh, when I was about to buy the tickets, I saw some German who was going through a crowd. You know, the Venice railway station is always incredibly crowded.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: And he went through this crowd of people, pushing with his elbow and saying, "Don't push. Don't push," you know? [They laugh.] So I figured, gee, what do I want to go see those people for, you know? [Paul Cummings laughs.] The whole country is like that. You know, I still don't like the Germans.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And he un—he undid the whole thing for you.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. So I—so we went to Austria. We went to Vienna instead.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And, um, then I found out that the Viennese behaved even worse toward the Jews than the Germans did, you know, under Hitler. But still, they're very pleasant people, and they behaved very well toward—toward us. You know, we had a good time there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, Vienna's a, kind of, marvelous city anyway [ph].

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. How long were you there?

WOLF KAHN: Just visiting for a week.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: You know, we always took these little side trips, like you do when you live in Europe. We went to Spain. We went to, uh, Greece. You know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Look around, see what it's like.

WOLF KAHN: That's right. Every time a check came from Grace, I looked at Emily, and I said, "Where do we go now?" [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: So that was really a rather exciting time—

WOLF KAHN: Oh, yeah. It was great.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —[cross talk] trips, and work, and—

WOLF KAHN: It was great. It was—uh, I was a bit nervous about my work, because it was changing right underneath my feet.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. So what did you do when you came back?

WOLF KAHN: When I came back? Uh, then life began in earnest, because we had a child.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And, uh, we, uh, um—things weren't going terribly well, financially. Then I got a job teaching at Cooper Union, and I got a couple of grants, got a—a Guggenheim, you know, to tide me over—over a year—couple of years. [00:42:03]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: But, uh, I—I—I, sort of, could see that it didn't necessarily have to be fun to be an artist, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: But there, too, Sally Avery and Milton had prepared me. They told me it goes up and it goes down, and it goes up and it goes down.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And you just—

WOLF KAHN: [Cross talk] you've got to be ready for both of them. [Paul Cummings laughs.] You know? They both—they both have their pitfalls.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And you just keep working.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, now, did your work change after you came back?

WOLF KAHN: When I came back?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Yes, it changed again. Then it went through a whole lot of changes. And now that I look at it, uh, it seems to me that I was responding much more than I was aware of to what was in the air at the time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Meaning what? What—

WOLF KAHN: Um, the work that I did in, um—like, in the six—in the early '60s had a lot of this, sort of, uh, abstract impressionist look. You know, like Resnick and so forth.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, it got very dark at one point, too, didn't it?

WOLF KAHN: Well, that was later.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was later.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. It got—it was very—at that time, it was almost—almost white, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And then I got a job—I got my first teaching job. I went to Berkeley, and I—I was a visiting professor there. Um, and that made me very nervous, because—

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you like that? I mean, that's another world out there.

WOLF KAHN: Yes, and I didn't like it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: I didn't like it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why?

WOLF KAHN: It seemed to be—to be, uh, a place that I would never get used to.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm. How long were you there?

WOLF KAHN: It was summer—it was a summer place all year round, you know? [Laughs.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Uh-huh [affirmative]. No seasons.

WOLF KAHN: Well, no, it's just, you know—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: —it's just, you know—you go up to Provincetown, and you know that it's going to be less intense than in the wintertime, in a certain sense. In other—as far as pleasures, and screwing around, and so forth, it's going to be more intense, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: You're going to be less responsible, and living better than you do in the winter, you know.
[00:44:02]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: But you're not—you're going to be, sort of, living on the top of things, you know? On the surface of things. And that's, kind of, the way I felt in—in San Francisco. I had—I had this one semester job. And Cajori was there at the time, and Sid Gordon, and, uh, Raymond Rocklin, and all kinds of people like that. De Kooning was there. De Kooning, uh—there was a party before my first day of teaching, and, uh, I said to de Kooning, "You know, I'm rather worried about, uh—" Because I was teaching mostly graduate students, and most of these people are older than I am.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: "And I have a feeling they're not going to take anything I say." And de Kooning said, "Well, you just tell them, tell them to talk to the president. Don't tell me—don't complain to me, because the president asked me to be here, because he thinks I'm a big shot, see?" [They laugh.] Just, "Don't talk to me." So I—I—I took that much to heart. But then as soon as anybody gave me a—a terrible argument—which they did, because I was very dogmatic, too, at the time—um, I didn't have the courage to—to spring that de Kooning on them, [they laugh] you know? I just told them—"Um, I mean, you know, um, go to see, um, the president, you know, and, um, complain to him." [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, how did you like teaching in a fancy place like that?

WOLF KAHN: I was very nervous at that time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Cross talk.]

WOLF KAHN: My work was changing. It wasn't a good time to be teaching. It was my first teaching job. And I, sort of, you know, was touted as a celebrity, as a hot New York painter.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: I felt anything but that, because I—I really was very nervous about my work, and it was undergoing, uh, all sorts of—of—of difficulties at the time. [00:46:03]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Hmm. They you started—what, in '61, you started at Cooper.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did that come about?

WOLF KAHN: Because—through—through Emily, I think, mostly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

WOLF KAHN: Because the dean, uh, um, I think, met Emily on the street, and he asked her, uh, uh, "How's your husband doing?" And I think she said, "He's not doing all that well right now." So he said, "Well, why don't we give him a job?"

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Oh, that was, uh—

WOLF KAHN: "I've been looking for young people." Dowden. Ray Dowden.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. And, uh, Cooper, I really liked teaching there much better. By that time, I was a little more experienced, too.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative]. But how long—you're still teaching, aren't you?

WOLF KAHN: No, I don't.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No? When did you—

WOLF KAHN: I quit last year.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, you did.

WOLF KAHN: After 16 years. [Laughs.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: You finally decided—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, yeah. Well, I quit because I think, um, I think they need young—young people.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. I'm too bad-tempered to be a teacher.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Really?

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why do you say that?

WOLF KAHN: Well, I don't have enough sympathy for—for the ethos of—of—of the young people today. You know, I think—I think maybe, uh, having to deal with a teenager at home, uh, soured me on—on these kids, because I constantly saw echoes of my own daughter, you know, in—in these kids, a certain, uh, um—I mean, I—I couldn't relate to them. My idea as an art student and their ideas seemed to me to be very different, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Cross talk.]

WOLF KAHN: And unless you can see yourself as a student in the people that you're dealing with, I think you have no right to teach them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

WOLF KAHN: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I think you're right. I think their ambition and points of reference now are very different from the more traditional students [ph].

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. And I mean, you know, I mean, I happen to think [ph] that the ambitions and point of reference are—are like—like, on a lower plane, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [00:48:00]

WOLF KAHN: But I think that's very damaging to them to have to do with somebody who thinks that, you know. So I—like, I—I gracefully withdrew.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Especially from—since I, for the last few years, certainly hadn't had to teach.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Uh, I taught almost from a sense of—of, uh, noblesse oblige. I felt that I'd been the recipient of good instruction, and, uh, I should carry on, uh, because I took teaching seriously. And I—I still don't think art

students are being spoiled by the instruction they're getting, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: I mean, they're being—they're—they're not being spoiled in the sense that they're getting too much good instruction. [Laughs.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Right. Well, I don't think they ever do.

WOLF KAHN: Huh?

PAUL CUMMINGS: They never really do, do they?

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, well, uh, I did. I think Hofmann was a super teacher, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Not—not only a good teacher, but even a good example, a, sort of, a good role model.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah. What did you teach there at Cooper? The same thing—

WOLF KAHN: Drawing and painting.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: On the—which—what levels? All of them?

WOLF KAHN: All kinds. What I liked to teach the best, especially toward the end, were freshmen.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

WOLF KAHN: Oh, yeah. You know, I'm like [ph]—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Because they have—

WOLF KAHN: —the Catholic church. Give them to me before they're three and four years old, and after that, you can do whatever you want with them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Get them while they're young, huh?

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm. That's an interesting observation, that you liked the younger ones.

WOLF KAHN: Well, the younger ones just—just, you don't have to unteach. I'm sure if—have you ever taught, Paul?

PAUL CUMMINGS: No.

WOLF KAHN: Well, anyway, in painting, most—most of your job is to unteach something that somebody else has taught wrong, anyway. You know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You know, I—and people come up with the damndest things. Like some teachers say you can't cut off corners, and others say you can't use white in your painting. Others say you can't use black. You know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Can't paint in the middle, can't paint in the edge. [00:50:00] [Laughs.]

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, all—all—all kinds of—of silly rules, and—and prisons, which, uh—for which, uh, I—I see no sense. I suppose I—I—I created my own rules and prisons, for which somebody else can't see any sense, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: But at least I wasn't aware of it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: I tried not to, anyway.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You did some teaching at Haystack.

WOLF KAHN: Yes, I taught at Haystack.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was that about?

WOLF KAHN: Well, that was just—just one summer.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Summer? Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: I taught, uh, um, painting. But the students—you know, I mean—painting, you see—in any context where there's other things being taught, such as weaving, and pottery, and, um, uh—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —all the crafts they have.

WOLF KAHN: —all these crafts. You know, painting is something in which, unless—it's, sort of, like violin playing. Unless you're—you're very good, it's really painful. You know, you have to—you have to overcome, like, a certain level, before you can give pleasure to anyone.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Painting is really a difficult art, a difficult medium. And, uh, uh, in a school where—you know, almost anybody after a week can make a pot that looks like a pot, you know, that's no longer painfully inept. But I think in order to become a painter and have your picture look other than painfully inept, you have to already have, like, two or three years of practice, so that the brush starts doing more or less what you want it to.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Uh-huh [affirmative], right.

WOLF KAHN: And so I was always made very uncomfortable by—by the way people were particularly unhappy, and looked—

PAUL CUMMINGS: The painting was nothing—

WOLF KAHN: —particularly inept—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, I see.

WOLF KAHN: —in a context of a craft school, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: A weaving person at the end of two weeks had a—[00:52:01]

WOLF KAHN: Right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —had something to show, and—

WOLF KAHN: They had—they—they could do a necktie or a scarf, and it looked like a perfectly reasonable scarf. Why not?

PAUL CUMMINGS: And the poor painting student was there—

WOLF KAHN: The poor painting student was still, you know—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —fighting. [Laughs.]

WOLF KAHN: —fighting the medium. It was too dry-looking, and stiff, you know. Oh, it was—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah. What do you think that—you know, I always, sort of, ask people who've taught this. What—what do you say to a young art student who wants to study painting? In your case, you got more interested in the freshmen.

WOLF KAHN: Well, the first thing I'd say to them is, learn to be a student. That's something that very few kids nowadays know how to do. And I think being a student means to really find a good teacher, respect what he does, and—and have a, sort of, a predatory attitude toward him. You know, that you're going to try and swipe whatever he knows how to do.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You know, by might and main.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And forget about this precious individual—individual that's yourself, because you're not going to make it mean anything by, uh, uh, zooming in on that fact, anyway, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Individuals are a dime a dozen. Like, everybody's an individual.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: But somebody who knows how to learn is already rare, you know. So I think the first thing you have to learn is, like, to listen, and to—to follow instructions, and to—to—to be humble.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: It's something that very few students know how to do today.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, not today. How can you know?

WOLF KAHN: I'm sure it's not—it's not hip.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah..

WOLF KAHN: You know? But on the other hand, how are you going to learn, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: It—it—it's not logical. You can't learn by knowing it all.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [Inaudible] took that advice—your students ever take that and—

WOLF KAHN: My better students do it without—you know, without knowing it, almost. [00:54:04]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm. Don't you think, also, that the art student, as a personage or a persona, has changed in the last decade or so, or wouldn't you think so?

WOLF KAHN: I'd—I think the quality of kid that goes into art today, the average quality of kid, is lower. And I'll tell you why. Um, because, uh, everybody who can't get it together thinks that by that very fact, they're an artist. You know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, well, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Because they're suffering, and they're—they're—you know, and they can't respond to authority. And they read about Van Gogh having a hard time in the Grande Chaumière, and cutting off his ear, and being crazy, you know, and so forth.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Inaudible], yeah.

WOLF KAHN: So they figure, well, you know, there's something to be said for me being—feeling so crazy.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Cross talk.]

WOLF KAHN: I'm really an artist. You know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: And so you get some very sentimental kids who—who are—who are in art schools.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And, um, um, and it's especially those kids that you can't teach anything.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really? I mean, I just—oh, I guess [cross talk].

WOLF KAHN: Because, yeah, they want to express themselves.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: I think that's one other thing that art students have to forget about, is to express themselves. That's a pernicious idea.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, they don't know what to express. I mean, they don't know who they are, to do it anyway.

WOLF KAHN: Right. Right. You know, so—so what they're really, basically, doing is just messing about, mucking about, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And—and—and the attrition rate is—is tremendous.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yeah. Well, it always is, though, isn't it?

WOLF KAHN: It always is, but it used to be that people could somehow go from—from—if they couldn't be artists, they could go to Madison Avenue, or they could go. [00:56:04] I mean, that still happens, of course, but I think there's more and more people who really have to absolutely kiss the whole idea goodbye. And, uh—

PAUL CUMMINGS: That might be true, too.

WOLF KAHN: You know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: But it's funny you said that about students recently, because this morning, somebody was telling me about Skowhegan, and how Jack Eastman had said that students that have applied, and the ones they've taken in the last two, three years, four years, have been way below the quality of previous years.

WOLF KAHN: Hmm. Well, I don't know. Look, you can still get terrific students.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Oh, I'm sure.

WOLF KAHN: But I think the—the extremes are greater, maybe, than they used to be, and the—the norm is lower. I think the norm is lower, because the kids don't—don't come with the proper attitude.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, and art—the art world was a glamorous thing all through the '60s.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. Maybe they—they're looking for glamour, and they're looking for—they're looking for easy outs. And—and, uh, um, there's all sorts of ways of—of deluding yourself and fooling yourself in art, you know. But then you get out—you get out into the world at large, and then, of course, things, uh, become much harsher.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Yeah, actually, you have this commission that's been going on and on at the Jewish Theological Seminary doing portraits.

WOLF KAHN: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did that all come about?

WOLF KAHN: Well, that came about when I came back the second time from Italy.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So that was—

WOLF KAHN: I was—I was, again, terribly broke.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The second was '60—

WOLF KAHN: That was in '64, that I came back.

PAUL CUMMINGS: '64.

WOLF KAHN: And I had a second child.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. What is it about Italy that produces children? [They laugh.]

WOLF KAHN: It's true. That's right, the Italians have a very high birthrate, too, don't they?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Well, maybe I was tarred with a Catholic brush. [00:58:00] [Paul Cummings laughs.] Are you a Catholic, Paul? Yeah?

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Inaudible.]

WOLF KAHN: Well, you must be a bad Catholic, because you don't have any children.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] But—but anyway, going back to the commission. How did that come about? Because you've done a lot of paintings for them, haven't you, now?

WOLF KAHN: No, I only did five.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really? Oh, I thought it was, sort of—

WOLF KAHN: No, no. They ran out of money at a certain point, and also, I think, out of interest.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: And, um, even though they claimed to like those paintings that I made, or some of them, anyway, I'm not sure if—if I'm the right painter for the Jewish Theological Seminary, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who did you paint, now? What were the—

WOLF KAHN: I painted—my first picture I did, um—and I'll tell you who's responsible for—for those commissions. And be it—be it said to their eternal credit. I think they cooked the whole thing up in order that I could make money.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Wow, mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Because, uh, uh, I was really broke, and I called up Meyer Schapiro, who is a great friend of mine, marvelous man. Um, and I said, "Meyer, what—do you have [laughs] any ideas? I really need a job, or—or, uh, sell some paintings, or something." And Meyer said, "Oh, I just heard that they're going to build a new building. Gordon Bunshaft has designed a new library for the Jewish Theological Seminary. And I've—I heard them say—David Finn, who is on the board of trustees, was saying, 'Wouldn't it be nice to have portraits of the senior faculty, or a big picture of the senior faculty?' And, uh, so maybe you should be the one to do it." And he also remembered—he said he mentioned that he'd seen a portrait that I did of Tom Hess at some show at the New School, and he was very impressed with that. And I used to be a pretty fair portrait artist, you know. Did you ever see the portrait I did of Frank O'Hara?

PAUL CUMMINGS: I don't remember that one.

WOLF KAHN: I'll have to show you afterwards. It's a good picture. And even my Hess portrait is—is a very, uh, uh, good likeness. [01:00:02]

PAUL CUMMINGS: You know who would be interested in the O'Hara—

WOLF KAHN: Who?

PAUL CUMMINGS: —is Peter Schjeldahl. I was writing a book on him.

WOLF KAHN: Oh, really?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Peter is?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. So you should tell him you have that.

WOLF KAHN: Do you see him?

PAUL CUMMINGS: No, but I send him postcards when I see things, or stuff related to O'Hara.

WOLF KAHN: I'll show it to you afterwards.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Okay, great, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: I don't want to—I don't want to—because I'll tell you, I invited Peter Schjeldahl to—to a party about two years ago, and, um, uh, he didn't come, you know. Because he gave me a very nice—he gave me a very nice write up in the Sunday *Times* about four or five years ago, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And then he met Emily, uh, in jury duty.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Really?

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. And, uh, so I invited him to this party. I felt, well, you know, why not? And then he didn't come, or he made it sound as though I was maybe trying to make some sort of—sort of self-promotion.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, he's very neurotic about that.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. And that wasn't the case at all. But, you know, if I wrote him a card now, then he'd think even more that, [Paul Cummings laughs] you know, I was trying to—to—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Okay.

WOLF KAHN: So maybe, if—if you sent—I'll show you the picture afterwards. It's fun [ph]. It's a good picture.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Anyway, going back to the portrait business. Now, wasn't—didn't that present a problem, though, [inaudible] seminary [inaudible] have portraits of their—

WOLF KAHN: It did. It did. It did. And, um, uh, David Finn—do you know David?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. Yeah, yeah, I do.

WOLF KAHN: Uh, he, uh, he solved it with a masterful stroke of his public relations pen.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. [Laughs.]

WOLF KAHN: He wrote them a note saying—a memo, in which he said—he says, "Why don't we, instead of having"—well, first of all, he wanted to have this group portrait, but I was scared by that, you know, because if one of them doesn't turn out [laughs] to be any good, the whole picture—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —the whole thing is [inaudible].

WOLF KAHN: —has to be dumped, you know? And I'm not that expert, that I can do, um, you know, a picture with 20 people in it, and—and make it come off. [01:02:03]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: So, um, I mean, I was really using those rabbis to get back into portraiture, [laughs] rather than, you know, as I should have, which is to start out as a professional portrait painter, you know, and—and then do the work.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, let me—

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PAUL CUMMINGS: —side four. I think I said it's side four. Anyway, you were going to continue the story about how the portraits came about, and after David Finn wrote his memo, which consisted of what?

WOLF KAHN: Oh, oh, yes. He said, um, that contrary to—to what they think, it's really not a representation, but it's an abstraction, because I'm not going to be painting individuals, but I'll be painting a picture of a friendship. So it—it was two guys, you see, Dr. Lieberman [ph] and Dr. Finkelstein [ph].

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And I had them posing, having an exchange of conversation, you see?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And so it wasn't the graven image at all, but it was an abstraction. [Laughs.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Cross talk.] [Laughs.]

WOLF KAHN: So under those auspices, they finally agreed, reluctantly, somewhat, you know, to allow this—this indecency to be perpetrated upon them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you like painting those [ph] people?

WOLF KAHN: Well, they're great, because they're great men, you know. Lieberman, especially. He's the foremost Talmudic scholar, practically, in the world, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And he's a splendid guy, and I got to be very good friends with him. And I, through him, learned to have belated very high respect for the religion of my fathers, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: And also, then, I painted another man, Dr. Spiegel [ph], who, um, is an expert on—on medieval Hebrew poetry, Jewish poetry.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And he was a splendid guy, too. I mean, these are very high—high-quality people [inaudible], you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Now, where did you do those?

WOLF KAHN: Up there. I trundled all my stuff up to the seminary.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, my heavens, and set up.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. Or else in their apartments. I think, uh, Spiegel I did in his house. [00:02:00] Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative]. Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, that was, kind of, fun, but again, it made me a bit nervous, because I was really practicing portraiture on these very busy people.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Right.

WOLF KAHN: And three—I—I generally did about four of them, of which three were totally unrecognizable.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And then in desperation, finally, the fourth one turned out to be halfway decent.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you make, drawings of them, or—

WOLF KAHN: No, I actually started the painting of them there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So you worked right from—from them.

WOLF KAHN: —from nature, yeah. And I'm not able, like Augustus John, to keep a conversation going and—and still keep my attention on my work.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Which I think is a sign of a really professional portrait artist. Because you've got to do a whole lot of other things, aside from being a good painter, to—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —do that [cross talk]—

WOLF KAHN: You know, you have to keep your—you have to keep your sitter animated, because otherwise, they

fall asleep.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: You know, they're not used to sitting still, these people.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. They're used to busy—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm. How many years was that, again, that you did—

WOLF KAHN: This was 1964 through about '67, I did it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Hmm. And no more. I mean, you don't do them anymore.

WOLF KAHN: No. And I don't miss it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah?

WOLF KAHN: It was—was fun while it lasted, but it was also—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —it was enough.

WOLF KAHN: It was enough, and it was hard work.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. You really haven't gone back to do portraits or paintings of people very much.

WOLF KAHN: Well, I—I tell you, the thing—my idea about portraiture is, it's a knack, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And, um, it's something which gets lost rather easily, and then you have to regain it painfully by—by practicing, and—and getting a lot of people to sit for you. And—and—and you get it back. It's, sort of, like, you have to—but you have to do finger exercises.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see. You've got to keep at that only—

WOLF KAHN: You have to keep at that, yeah. And—and forget about landscape painting, forget about all—all the more freer exercises, you know. [00:04:01]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Maybe that's why the people who do it end up just doing only that.

WOLF KAHN: Being portrait painters, yeah. And of course, there's a tremendous, uh, uh, call for it, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Uh, you can make a lot of money doing that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. If you [ph] have a fancy style, or something different.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: People want it.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. And—but there's—there aren't any good portrait painters today. I mean, it's—it's right that it should be relegated to the kind of people who paint for Portraits, Incorporated, you know. Um, there are very few people who do a decent job. There's one guy named—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who are—yeah.

WOLF KAHN: —Shikler. Do you know Aaron Shikler?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Aaron Shikler, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: He does a decent job. I mean, he's not a great artist, but he's a good portrait artist, you know, because he, uh—

PAUL CUMMINGS: But they have a lot of skill, some of those people.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, yeah. Well, I think it's—it's mostly a matter of skill. Like, my problem as a portrait artist was that my great god really was Kokoschka.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You know? Who tried very hard to—to deal with the psychological insights that he had. So I had to—I'd get to know my sitters, you know, and—and, uh, in fact, the early ones that Kokoschka did were all of his friends, and people of his circle, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right, yeah. I once had a painting class from him.

WOLF KAHN: Really?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: In Greece, or in London, or—

PAUL CUMMINGS: No, I mean, in Minnesota.

WOLF KAHN: Oh, really? He taught there?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, he—he was a visiting artist there at one time.

WOLF KAHN: Well, he must have been—

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Cross talk.]

WOLF KAHN: —an impressive personality.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Sort of.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Sort of. I mean, I don't remember him like Hofmann, for example.

WOLF KAHN: Did you study with Hofmann, too, Paul?

PAUL CUMMINGS: No. I just knew him.

WOLF KAHN: Knew him.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I mean, I wasn't studying painting for painting. I was just taking [inaudible] classes for other purposes. But, um—

WOLF KAHN: Well, Kokoschka had a terrible falling off, I think. I think—I mean, if you think—I mean, he's really—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, he just, kind of, stopped. [00:06:00]

WOLF KAHN: —one of the modern artists who—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: —who had no development. I mean, he just, sort of, petered out. I think his later work is—is—is much, much weaker than—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, he didn't seem to have—yeah. But don't you think, also, it's hard to be an expressionist for one's lifetime?

WOLF KAHN: I think it is. I think there's very few instances of anybody—

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's a young man's game when you're angry and have a lot of energy, and drive, and—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. Yeah, the only—the only person who was an expressionist, uh, uh, and—and, uh, became better as he went along, really, is [inaudible], I think, though even there, there's—there's—there's matters of argument, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: But at least he had a—a, kind of, you know, a—a sense—you had a sense that compass [ph] grew larger, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, that's true. That's true. Yeah, one—one of the things that—over the years, that's—that's interesting, is the various artists you've mentioned. You know, Brach, that you were interested in, [inaudible] Picasso or Bonnard, on and on. Um, are these interests that came and went, or did some of them linger?

WOLF KAHN: Oh, they all lingered. I mean, you know, I'm one of those people who, [Paul Cummings laughs] uh, doesn't ever give anything up. You know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: You know [ph], once it's there, it stays.

WOLF KAHN: Like, once I've been in bed with a woman, I want to fuck her the rest of my life. [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's so rare these days.

WOLF KAHN: Really? Well, but look at me here. I mean, I've been in this studio for 27 years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: I'm a stick in the mud, I guess. [Paul Cummings laughs.] You know? But that's also my strength. I—you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: I'm—I have a feeling things get better as you get to know them better.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You know, I never wear any—anything out, or very few things that I wear out.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm. It just goes on, and on, and on?

WOLF KAHN: Well, it just—it's not so much that it goes on and on. I keep—keep finding new reasons for—for, uh, being involved, you know. [00:08:02]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Uh-huh [affirmative], uh-huh [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Um, the only—the only person—the only person with whom I was very involved when I was an—um, uh, young, who had a—who I was disappointed more recently was Dostoyevsky.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really? Why?

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. I—all of a sudden, I—I can't stand it anymore, all that—all that hysteric—uh, hysterical business. You know, I mean, it seems to me that life shouldn't be on that kind of a plane of unresolvedness all the time, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Of incompleteness. As his characters—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Some of that's [cross talk].

WOLF KAHN: —his characters are—you know, it's—it—finally, I—I read the *Brothers Karamazov*, and I got to the end, and I said, what a goddamn tempest in a teapot this all is. You know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], yeah.

WOLF KAHN: And, uh, I'm sure I'm wrong, but it's, like, one of the few instances where I—I—I came across something which I adored when I was younger, which I'm no longer so involved with. You know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Do you still read much?

WOLF KAHN: Um, not with the intensity that I used to. I think, you know, I've become considerably more stupid and less interesting since I was young.

[Audio Break.]

WOLF KAHN: Painting really makes you stupid.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why do you say that?

WOLF KAHN: Well, because you don't think. You're all the time looking, you know. I mean, you know, you—you become so interested in—in—in focusing on something narrow, uh, that—that—that you're—and you get further and further away from conceptual thinking.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

WOLF KAHN: Into a kind of—into a kind of—what is it—right hemispheric thinking, you know, where you're involved with—with—with, um, kind of, intuitive insights, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You mean, conceptual art is a misnomer by definition, then. [Laughs.]

WOLF KAHN: I think that's right. [00:10:00] I don't think there is any such thing, you know. It's a public relations game.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But why do you say you get dumber? I mean, I'm curious about—

WOLF KAHN: Well, that's exaggerating. I mean, you get smarter about some things, and you lose interest and capacity for others.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: But I can no longer read a—a page of—of really dense writing. I mean, I'm—you know, let's say a philosophical text, I can no longer deal with.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Because it doesn't interest you, or it's—

WOLF KAHN: No, because I don't have the concentration for that kind of thing anymore.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You have it for something else, though.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, I have increased concentration for my work and less concentration for—for things that don't bear directly on it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So you've refined what your interests are.

WOLF KAHN: Well, I don't know if I've—I've—that presupposes a, kind of, conscious intentionality, which—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, I mean, just in—

WOLF KAHN: —which I would like—there, too, I would like [Paul Cummings laughs] to be able to hold onto what I used to be able to do rather, you know, successfully.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. But, I mean, in—just in the process of working, you've decided, well, that's what I want to do, and the other things—

WOLF KAHN: I haven't decided anything. It all happened. [Laughs.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Well, but, I mean, the act is the decision.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, yeah. Well, the decision is, sort of, forced on you. I mean, in the sense that you get more interested in one thing, and you're not able to focus energy on everything to—to that degree.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's true. That's true.

WOLF KAHN: You know, it happens to all of us.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Now, um, you know, the—over the years—I was thinking the other—yesterday about all the color in your paintings, and the brushstroke changes, and all the things, you know, and—and, uh, you've never had a big retrospective or anything, have you?

WOLF KAHN: Mm-mm [negative], mm-mm [negative].

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, I couldn't find one. And it would just be fascinating to see the—

WOLF KAHN: Well, uh, uh, I was negotiating with the Tulsa museum. They were interested in having me st—having—starting one there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And, uh, I was perfectly willing. [00:12:00] But nothing much has come of it yet, although they seem to be still vaguely interested. But I—I want to be sure that it happens in—in a decent way, that they have enough money, and, you know, I'm in no hurry.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: I'm in no hurry. I don't want to, uh, really, um—I have a feeling—I really do have a feeling that I'm, like, like, one of the two or three best landscape painters in the country.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Who do you think the other ones are?

WOLF KAHN: Well, one of them is dead. Fairfield, I thought, was my peer.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Porter, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. And, um, oh, I have respect for John [inaudible].

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And I have—I certainly loved Diebenkorn's landscapes, when he was painting them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: But, um, aside from that, I really don't—don't have that much feeling for—for anyone else's right now. You know, I'm sure I'm overlooking people.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: But, uh—

PAUL CUMMINGS: What interested about Fairfield Porter's work?

WOLF KAHN: Um, well, its similarity to mine. You know, the fact that he was digging in, in one place, and really—really, uh, you know, without trying to—to go far afield from his roots, from his—his—uh, the place he knew well.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And his—his control of tonalities, his touch. Not always beautiful, but always—always, uh, very conscious and very controlled.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Very [ph] awkward, sometimes.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But he always—you know, he would always—

WOLF KAHN: Well, there's a, kind of, rectitude about him.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: You know, which I like very much. And the young kids like it very much. He's a, kind of, a god among some of these young kids.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

WOLF KAHN: Oh, yeah. Who don't—who on the other hand, have—have no idea of where his culture comes from, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Hmm. I mean, they just see occasional pictures, and respond to them. Well, that's nice to know. [00:14:00] I think he's a very overlooked artist, still, in a lot of ways.

WOLF KAHN: Well, he is and he's not. I mean, in my circles, everybody certainly knows he's—he's there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Hmm. Well—

WOLF KAHN: Did you ever—did you ever interview Fairfield?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Well, he has—the admirable thing about him is the width of his culture, really.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, it was astounding.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: And I think [inaudible]—you know, that, again, the young people don't understand, is how—how important that is to inform your art.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: They still, sort of, think that you can be narrow, provincial, and—and—and, um, uh, still—still come out, you know, having something large to say.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. It doesn't happen. [Laughs.]

WOLF KAHN: No.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No. Um, you've—I wanted to ask you about a couple other teaching things you did, one at the Brooklyn Museum?

WOLF KAHN: Oh, that was just a one—one-shot deal.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, was that—that was a little—yeah.

WOLF KAHN: I went and talked—talked to the students.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Uh, I do that all the time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you like that?

WOLF KAHN: I like—I like it very much. I call it hit-and-run teaching. You know, you go—you go, you—you go full steam, you know, and you charge in there, and you see—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —take over. [Laughs.]

WOLF KAHN: —you see the students flying up in all directions, you know, and then you let for somebody else to clean up the mess after you're gone, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You know, it's—it's—but my favorite teaching right now, really, is to teach, uh, adults, amateurs.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really? Why is that?

WOLF KAHN: I have a feeling—I have a feeling they're the most grateful, and the most, uh—uh, least spoiled, and—

PAUL CUMMINGS: You—what, do you—do you do that now?

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, I do that quite a bit. I get invited by, um, art associations, and—

PAUL CUMMINGS: You mean, you come on for a day or two, or something?

WOLF KAHN: —like, the Huntington Township Art League. No, I do a four-day workshop.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh. What is that? What do you do? I didn't know about this.

WOLF KAHN: I go in the spring—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: —generally, or if the climate's nice, say in Florida or, you know, I've gone down to Texas and so forth, to an amateur art group. [00:16:10] They invite me, and they—I have a four-day intensive working thing where I—I take down my own materials, and I work side by side with the other people. My students, ostensibly. And it's usually a very mixed group of all—all kinds of abilities, and—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —ages, and everything else, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: —ages, and schoolteachers. Art teachers are in there, you know. And talented kids, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. How many would you have in a group like that?

WOLF KAHN: Retired people. About 25, generally. You know, and they—they each pay 50 bucks, or something like that, maybe a little more now with inflation. And—and, uh—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —expenses, and whatnot.

WOLF KAHN: That's right. And—and—and, uh, I go down and I give a lecture, generally a public lecture.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: And, uh, uh, and then we go to the—the four days that I'm there, we generally go to six different spots, six or seven different spots.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, [inaudible]. Do they pick those?

WOLF KAHN: [Cross talk] pre-scouted, uh, with—with me going around with the person that's, uh, sort of, in—you know, arranging the thing. And we start things, you know. We don't try to finish anything. We start things. Then we have one evening where people bring in their outside work that they've—you know, we talk about it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do a critique.

WOLF KAHN: Do a critique, yeah. And it's generally four very intense days for—for everybody, including me. [Laughs.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: You know, I'm charging around, trying to start my own picture and still see 25 other people, you know, all of them with tremendous expectations.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How does—what—how do these things happen? Do they find you, or—

WOLF KAHN: Uh, yeah. They find me. Sometimes I, um, um—like at Princeton, Princeton Art Association. I've been going down there four—I went four times in a row, but then I kept getting the same people over and over again. [00:18:03] Some of them were starting to get influenced by me, and so forth.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, dear. Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: I figure it's better for me to go elsewhere.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's enough, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Uh, so I haven't gone down there anymore. And they're very sad, because people start looking forward to those things.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

WOLF KAHN: I'm good in those kind of situations, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: But I'm not good over the whole year with young art students that are—

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's too persistent.

WOLF KAHN: Well, it's just—the responsibility hangs too heavy on me.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: That's part of it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm. Do you do other lectures and all that other business, as so many people do?

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, everybody—you know, it's part of the whole—whole game that's going on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: What I usually do is, I take a bunch of slides of—of landscape paintings from the past, and then I talk about them, and then I cap the whole thing with my last show. [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, terrific. Terrific.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You know what? Speaking of shows, you've had lots of exhibitions with Grace, almost—Borgenicht, almost every year or so.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, I've been with her. Talk about 20 years, you know, stick in the mud.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Everything is 20 years. [Laughs.]

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. Yeah, I don't change.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Um, well—

WOLF KAHN: She's a decent gallery.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Grace is all right. I don't think she can—you know, she's not the kind of gallery that's able to make an artist's reputation. You have to, sort of, do it yourself, almost.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. She works a lot with you, and, sort of, lets you do the outside work.

WOLF KAHN: I think so. Yeah. But she used to. In the beginning, she was very helpful in getting publicity, and—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: —so on. But I think she's gotten a little tired.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative]. What do the exhibitions mean to you? I mean, because that's the first time you really see everything lined up, and out, and—[00:20:02]

WOLF KAHN: Well, what they usually mean—I don't know. They usually mean that you raise your hopes, uh, unrealistically, and then have them dashed down to the ground, [Paul Cummings laughs] you know, and then you walk away consoling yourself with a—with—you know, crying all the way to the bank, so to speak.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. But, I mean, you've—

WOLF KAHN: Because I always do well there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: I generally sell out the shows.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Um, but I keep thinking something terrific is going to happen, like Hilton Kramer is going to change his mind, you know? [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Everybody thinks that, whomever [inaudible].

WOLF KAHN: He's going to finally like—like art that isn't [inaudible], you know? [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you [inaudible] sometimes come in and look and the paintings and say, Oh, yeah, well, why did I do that? Well, you know—do they look different to you?

WOLF KAHN: When they're over—when they're in the gallery?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Yes, they do, but they usually look much better than they do in the studio, you know, so they're not useful at all in that regard, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Because some people really go through a whole change once they see things out of studio and in the gallery, and up, and framed.

WOLF KAHN: That's not—I don't think that's a good—that's a good basis for one's development. I think you should be able to—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —do it before.

WOLF KAHN: Well, I mean, I really don't know—don't even think you judge your own work in that kind of a way. I—I don't.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you do it, then?

WOLF KAHN: Um, picture by picture, you know. I—I—I mean, every—the times that I've judged my work in toto have been always dreadful times when I was awfully depressed, you know, for some other reason.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: In which I started questioning my work in toto. And, um, uh, thought, well, you know, what a drag to be a landscape painter, or what a drag to be so bright, or what a drag to be painting only white and black paintings, or—you know? [00:22:00]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Um, but I think that doesn't mean anything. Basically, you take your stand on each painting, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And I've always believed in imposing my will upon my work as little as possible.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: You know? I don't think that's—I think—I think the brush does its own work.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So you just, kind of, let it happen.

WOLF KAHN: You just work there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. [Laughs.]

WOLF KAHN: You just—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —you just put the paint down.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. You're behind the brush, that's all, you know. And you're, sort of, guiding—gently guiding the brush, but it does its own work. [Laughs.] The paint does its own work.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But, now, sometimes your painting seems be in series. I know the—the, sort of, barns, and the woods, and [inaudible]—

WOLF KAHN: Well, that's because I have very few ideas. You know, I'm not very bright. [They laugh.] Not very rest—not restless enough. [Paul Cummings laughs.] They're not really in series. You know, series presupposes that you'll have a dominating format, which you want to go see through some sort of, um, permutation, right?

And that's not the way I work at all, you know. I just—I just happen to like my barn, and it's right in front of my nose all the time, when I'm up there in Vermont.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Whereabouts are you in Vermont?

WOLF KAHN: In West Brattleboro.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Uh, so—so, and—and a barn, as a structure, seems to me to—to, uh, to be, um uh, very interesting, you know. Very pregnant. And uh, uh, even though I'm—I'm really, basically, sick and tired of painting barns, I keep going back to them, because I keep seeing new possibilities in them, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: But I wouldn't call myself a series painter at all, you know. I'm—I'm—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, but it's just a, sort of—

WOLF KAHN: It's just an obsession, of sorts.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Or a—a—like I say, a lack of imagination. [00:24:00]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative]. What else do you paint? You did a—there's a lake, or a pond, or [inaudible].

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, I like—I like ponds. I like things like that. I like fields.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And, kind of, rows of trees.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, trees. You know, normal types of landscape involvement.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you, kind of, pick what you paint?

WOLF KAHN: Um, that's very interesting. I pick what I paint, uh—that's the most nervous-making part of the whole thing. The most anxiety-laden part is to pick a spot where you're going to paint, you know? Because you have to have some reason for being there, and not elsewhere.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You know, I mean, you, sort of, know that there's, like, 10 million spots, and you've got to choose one.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: So why are you going to choose that spot, you see?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: At the same time that you're—that you're trying to find a reason, you don't want to have a reason. You don't want to know what you're choosing. You want to, sort of, have the feeling it's choosing you.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You know, because I—I believe in some kind of passivity on the part of the artist.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it's, kind of, relying on intuition?

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, yeah. And it's very—you don't want to be too sure about why you're there. At the same time, you want to have an intimation that there's something there that—that you're really very interested in, you know —

PAUL CUMMINGS: And if you start working—

WOLF KAHN: —full of possibilities.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: And it's only in the process of work that you're going to really find out whether it's so, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And many times it's not. So—so that's—that's probably the most anxiety-laden part of being the kind of painter I am, is to—

PAUL CUMMINGS: But what do you do in the country? Do you make—you don't paint outside, do you?

WOLF KAHN: Sure.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I mean, make drawings, or—

WOLF KAHN: Sure, I paint outside.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: I try, as much as I can, to start outside. Now, I don't finish—I very seldom finish something outside.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: I always have second thoughts about it, and then sometimes I have bad starts, and I have a feeling, Well, so much the better, because it means I really have to work like a—like a horse to—to be able to—
[00:26:02]

PAUL CUMMINGS: —do it.

WOLF KAHN: —pull something off out of it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. But, now, but you finish a lot of paintings in the studio.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Or do you start paintings here based on studies?

WOLF KAHN: I do that, too. I—and I often start paintings based on an image that I've worked up to a certain point in another painting, in which I've seen, then, possibilities that—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see.

WOLF KAHN: —had escaped me previously. You know, I work—I, sort of, work things out in the wintertime.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it, kind of, becomes variants.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. Right. Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: You know, I mean, it's, sort of, like, you feel—you feel a soft point. You feel that there's a place where there's some give, and that's where you—that's where you start attacking the—the problem, you know, where there's some give. You know, if you've made a painting that's halfway good, you figure, Well, I'm going to work on that problem, and make it better.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. You know, it's fascinating. You use the word problem, which is a term I find that I don't hear from younger artists very much.

WOLF KAHN: Oh, really?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Well, I don't see it very much in the work of many younger artists.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And I just wondered, what did—what does that mean to you?

WOLF KAHN: A problem? Uh, well, it's—it—I guess it defines me as a formalist, basically. Because I—I still think—you know, an artistic problem to me would be, uh, uh, something which you feel is capable of formal resolution. Then you see, let's say, the way a building sits in a certain place.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: So if tying up sky, horizon, land, foreground, middle ground, background, in a kind of way that allows a movement of forms, you know? That's, like, a problem, you know. A coherent movement of forms.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Um, sometimes it may be a mood that—that—that defines your problem for you, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: But it's finally always going to be in terms of a coherent movement of forms.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative]. Hmm. [00:28:00] [Cross talk.]

WOLF KAHN: And I think each painting should have its own idea in it, its own problem, sort of, sort of—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: And the way—the way I work on a painting is to, like, resolve the problem, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But is that a conscious problem before the fact, or does it, sort of—the problem—

WOLF KAHN: No, the problem defines itself in the—in the process of working.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You have a vague inkling that there's a possibility. Let's say a possibility of a problem, you know. [They laugh.] Because once you've got the problem, then half your work is done. Then you understand which way the painting wants to go, where the axes are, you know, uh, whether you're—you're—you've got too much foreground, too much sky, uh, um, which way the movements should go, the hierarchy of the forms, whether the—the trees are too big or too small, you know. And these are all defined in the moment that you have—that you become coherent about your problem.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So that once you find your spot somewhere out there on the landscape, then the problems began [ph], as you—

WOLF KAHN: Well, then the problem period begins.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. [They laugh.]

WOLF KAHN: But it's like Cézanne. He said, "The thing is to find the center of your picture, and then everything moves around it."

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: I mean, the way I understand that, like, instead of center, you could say the problem, [laughs] you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I see.

WOLF KAHN: You know, uh, where things tie together.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But, now, do you—

WOLF KAHN: Transition. What kind of transitions to—to make, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: So that you accentuate this flow, this movement.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But, now, do you rely on what the atmosphere is like, or the color? I mean, because sometimes you end up with yellow trees, and all sorts of different [inaudible]—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —color situations.

WOLF KAHN: That—that all—that all helps, for sure. For sure, that all helps. [00:30:00]

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you never feel tied to any of those things.

WOLF KAHN: Oh, yes, you do.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah?

WOLF KAHN: You feel—you feel very—very—you feel very tied. Uh, I feel very tied to, uh, uh, what I see. You know? I don't want to do violence to it for—for the sake of, um—you know, like painting out the figure in that painting that I was talking about earlier, seemed to me a terrible sacrifice. You know, it's almost like cutting off my own head, because what—what I was trying to deal with was that very thing, the relation between the figure and the landscape.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: The fact that I wasn't able to deal with it and had to sacrifice the whole problem and start over again, uh, seemed like a terrible defeat.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Uh-huh [affirmative], uh-huh [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And sometimes you have those kinds of defeats, and you—you—you, uh, allow them, just in order to, um, to make a painting, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: But it's always a defeat. And sometimes it's hardly worth—worth—in your mind, it's hardly worthwhile to arrive at a painting at the sacrifice of all the things that seemed to you to be important in the beginning, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, but sometimes, to make a picture work, do you then go on to make another painting that does something else, using the same—

WOLF KAHN: Oh, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah?

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, you do. Then—then you find out, really, where you were wrong in the beginning, what—what—what mistakes you made at the start, you know. Because sometimes you make—in the very beginning of a picture, you make mistakes, which—which hound you all through the—which keep the picture from—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —ever working.

WOLF KAHN: —ever working, yeah. And then—then maybe after—sometimes after two years, you find out what you did wrong as this thing becomes more and more objective as a fact, and less and less—and more and more free from your hopes and fears that—that keep it from being, in your eyes, an objective fact. But, you know, like, the great artists, I think—let's say Matisse or somebody like that, you would think that that space of time would be very condensed, you know, that he understands what's needed objectively in the pictures. [00:32:06]

PAUL CUMMINGS: And fixes it right away.

WOLF KAHN: Right away, you know. [Paul Cummings laughs.] I mean, as he, you know—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —is working away, yeah—

WOLF KAHN: —he makes, like, these small hesitations, and at that moment, he's—he's figuring out what the picture needs, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: I mean, he's—he's—he understands the laws of his canvas right away, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, do you work on several paintings at once, or one at a time, or—

WOLF KAHN: Thirty or 40 at a time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

WOLF KAHN: Oh, yeah. That's the only way I can work, because, uh, I have to constantly work on them for a while, take them down, see them fresh, work on them, take them down, see them fresh, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it's like this whole merry-go-round. This one today, and—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And then sometimes for—for two months, I don't finish a single picture.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And then the next two weeks, I finish them all, you know. [They laugh.] That sometimes happens, you know. And I feel like I'm—certain—certain times, and it's—then you're very happy, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Then, like—like Matisse says, "*Je connu le bonheur.*"

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You know, and I figure it's at those times when everything falls into place, you know, in your work and in your life. And sometimes the two go together.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. But how can you—how do you work on that many pictures at the same time? I mean, physically. Do they go in out of the racks, or—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, they go in and out of the racks.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Because you don't have enough space to keep [inaudible].

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. Then you [ph] have piles of unfinished pictures leaning against the wall.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, mm-hmm [affirmative]. How do you decide which ones you're going to work on and which ones not?

WOLF KAHN: Oh, in the morning, you riffle through a pile, and you see something, uh, that—that looks possible.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, let's—let's work on that.

WOLF KAHN: You pull—pull it out, and you say, Gee, I—I—yeah, right, let me look at that. You know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Sure.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you know when a picture is finished, then?

WOLF KAHN: When the problem is solved. [Paul Cummings laughs.] Back to the problem. [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why do you think that term—that word, problem, became such a fixture in the dialog of the late '40s to '50s?

WOLF KAHN: Well, because the Abstract Expressionists, quite unlike what people believed about them, were all involved in very hard and fast, kind of, problematic—[00:34:09]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And, you know, because Abstract Expressionism is a direct descendant of Cubism, which is a highly formalistic art.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Abstract Expressionism, seen under certain light, is a highly formalistic art.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And, uh, uh, uh, Hofmann used to say, "It's a matter of a millimeter." You know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Cross talk.]

WOLF KAHN: Whether the thing comes off or not. And, uh, I think the—the distance between Mondrian and Abstract Expressionism is very small.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm. You mean, in terms of what makes it work?

WOLF KAHN: In terms of what makes the picture work, in terms of what the artists are finally looking for. They're

looking for a certain click, you know, when everything starts to lock together, you know, when the problem is solved. [They laugh.] And I'm still looking for that, you know, as a landscape painter.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: I mean, I feel myself thoroughly a child of Abstract Expressionism, although the work doesn't show it anymore, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, there are certain things. You know, the space, sometimes, and the, sort of, ability to push or move large areas around, and—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I mean, you have gone a long way from what it was—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, but I—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —20 or so years ago.

WOLF KAHN: —I must say, uh, in what I'm after, it's still that click, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: When I feel that—that things start locking in place, you know. The thing that you admire so much in Cézanne.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You know, that the—the amount of sky, and the thickness of the brushstroke, is just perfect in relation to the amount of brush—shrubbery in the left foreground, [laughs] and so forth.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah. Well, how do you work on the color? Because, you know, over the years, you've done very—almost white paintings at one point. [00:36:03]

WOLF KAHN: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And then they got almost black at another point.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And now—

WOLF KAHN: Now—now they're—they're chromatic—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —they're all very chromatic, and luminous, and—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How does the color work? Is that, sort of, of itself in the process?

WOLF KAHN: Well, there was a—there was an in-between stage where I was, sort of, pastel-y, where—where my paintings were informed by an overall haze.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right.

WOLF KAHN: Um, and then I, uh, felt strong enough to—to use strong color, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: It's—you change. I really—you know, about—about those things, the artist is always the last one to give the true answer.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I mean, you never—you haven't involved [ph] any theory about color, or—

WOLF KAHN: Oh, yeah, I've got lots of theories about color, but they're not able to be formulated.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You know? But I'm very systematic about color.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what way systematic?

WOLF KAHN: In my head. I mean, I feel—I feel—I know exactly what I want, and—and I have a—uh, certain tried and true combinations, which I try to constantly avoid. [Laughs.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And, uh, get beyond, you know. At the same time, that I fall back on if I have to, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So there's, sort of, an ideal in your mind that you hope evolves on the canvas at some point, or—no—or is that too cut and dried?

WOLF KAHN: No, that's too cut and dried.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. No, the idea is very vague in my mind, but the means to carry it out—

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Inaudible] the idea—not the idea, the ideal [inaudible] there's something that—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, there's an ideal. Yeah. I think I'm—you know, I—I was talking the other night with Jim, Jim Ackerman, the art historian at Harvard. He's a good friend of mine, who's writing—he wants to write a book about, uh, this—the—the criteria that underlie, um, you know, uh, judgments of quality.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And, uh, uh, um, I—I said to him, uh, I said to him, "Well, basically, you know, people are going to—going to tell you all sorts of things. [00:38:05] But if they make any sense, they're going to go right back to Plato."

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You know? And he said, "Well, they could also go back to Aristotle." And he's more interested in the pragmatic, and the Aristotelian kind of—kind of idea, you know. But I'm really very interested in Platonic. I think that—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

WOLF KAHN: —I think that—that—that your—your schemes, your—that finally, all pictures reduce themselves to certain kinds of schemes, I think.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you—how do you mean by that, schemes?

WOLF KAHN: Um, well, that—you know, the simplest one is by symmetry, right?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: I mean, which—which is something that, uh, certainly, Ellsworth Kelly knows, you know, and people like that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Um, and, uh, they get more and more complex, but they still stay schemes, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: There's a certain geometric substratum, you know, which I think corresponds to categories of the mind. You know? There's some kind of a Neoplatonic, Kantian thing that—that—that—and I think that's, sort of—when—if you're a formalist, that's what you're after, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: At the highest level.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Back to the structure business.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: And so, I mean, you know, that's all idealism.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah. Right, right. But you know, where—um, coming back—it comes back to problem again, doesn't it? [Laughs.]

WOLF KAHN: That's right. Well, once you start using the word problem, then you're right in—in the swamp of idealism. [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: But still, you know, the process, then, of making a painting, for you, could be, sort of, rather an indefinite period of time.

WOLF KAHN: Oh, yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: From the time you start—

WOLF KAHN: Oh, yes. I've got paintings that are—haven't taken shape over a period of three years of—of rather frequent attack. [00:40:02]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: And other paintings that I do in an hour, you know? So it's just a matter of how—how quickly I solve the problem. [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, do you think, when you are working on a painting that, say, takes several months or a year, that the ones—that the ones that are—

WOLF KAHN: —underneath?

PAUL CUMMINGS: —well, the ones that are underneath, or the ones that come along parallel to it, help the solution, help toward the solution of the difficult one?

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, yeah. Oh, yeah. And I think the ones that you work the longest on very often turn out to be—even though you as the artist hate them the most, because they've caused you all this pain—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: —and all this extra work—still, they turn out to be the richest and the most interesting, very often.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really? I mean, because they're just—they're more difficult?

WOLF KAHN: Because they have—they have all these—all this input, you know, all—all these ideas that are, you know, brought to bear on that painting. I mean, I, sort of, feel about a painting like I do about a party, that the more planning and the more worrying that you do beforehand, you know, the better the party's going to be. [Paul Cummings laughs.] If you just invite a bunch—everybody you know—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —arbitrarily—

WOLF KAHN: —and throw them all together, and feed them a whole lot of slop, you know, it's going to be that kind of a thing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: But if you really think, Gee, does such-and-such get along with so-and-so, and, you know, what—what—what can we feed them, and at what hour? When, you know, you start getting the food out too early, and then they can't get drunk, and nothing happens, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. [They laugh.]

WOLF KAHN: You know? So, I mean, you have to—you have to have—you have to have worry about the thing, you know, care.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And the same thing with painting. The more worry and care you put into a painting, either it goes

dead completely, or else it gets to be your best work.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. What do you think are the qualities, then, of your best work? What would you recognize as—

WOLF KAHN: There's two kinds of best work I have. Those paintings that have cost me the most pain, and the most work and that nevertheless survive in an enriched form; and then the ones that I just knock off, where—because I think I'm very talented, you see. [00:42:09] [Paul Cummings laughs.] So if I can allow this talent, this bravura business, to full sway, which only happens, you know, in the first hour or so that you work, or two hours, you know, before you have any worries and second thoughts.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: If that happens, then you also can come up with terrific paintings, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So it was [ph] really the total contrast.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Either instantaneous or drudgery. [Laughs.]

WOLF KAHN: That's right. That's right. And even between paintings that are usually not worth all that much, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I was going to ask you one thing, speak—thinking and, sort of, talking about the '50s. Did you see the 10th Street exhibitions that were just on [ph]?

WOLF KAHN: Yes. Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you think of those?

WOLF KAHN: Well, I thought it's amazing how—first of all, how tame they all become over time, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Even the wildest people, kind of, look almost classical now.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And then, also how the mediocre painters were better then than they are now, you know, because they were younger. They had more—they had more shit and molasses, you know. And the people who—who've lasted, and who've become well-known painters, were good then, too, in a different way. Like Pearlstein's early painting is quite terrific.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. And totally different from—

WOLF KAHN: And in a way, better than—than what he's doing now, but don't tell him.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But totally different from what you might expect, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Totally different, but it was a very good expressionist landscape, that early painting of Pearlstein's. Alex Katz's painting was nice, his early painting.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Cross talk.]

WOLF KAHN: It was a little bit less—it was—was a little bit less, um, um, uh, bravura than what he's doing now, you know, more modest, more humble. [00:44:00]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: But that was, sort of, nice. But it was very good, though, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And Wesselmann just got bigger and bigger and bigger.

WOLF KAHN: Well, Wesselmann is a guy who stayed exactly the same. You know, he's, sort of—I don't know what he was doing on 10th Street in the first place.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, he just, sort of, appeared, and did that, and then—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, he's, sort of—he's—he was—he was the—the announcement of the demise, really. [They laugh.] The fact that the Tanager gave him that show meant that—that their whole raison d'être had—had already gone by the board, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: They didn't know where their real interests lay.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, they changed by that time, I think.

WOLF KAHN: There wasn't anything—yeah, well, the—the—the thing that made them cohere, as a group, you know, was no longer, uh, available. Otherwise they would have all banded against Wesselmann. Let's face it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Yeah, that's true, yeah. Um, [inaudible] when did you move up to the country? How did that come about?

WOLF KAHN: Well, we—we always had, um—we always had summer places, you know, that we rented.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And as soon as you could no longer rent a summer place, which happened in the late '60s, you know, then we found it was too, um—it was just too awkward, and too risky, and too expensive, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Then you might as well have your own place, you know. And then we also had two small children. It got to be very unwieldy.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: So, uh, uh, we just found this place.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. So what do you spend, three months or four months, [inaudible]?

WOLF KAHN: Well, I generally spend four or five months up there in the summer.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Quite a bit of time out of the year.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I do a lot of painting in the fall.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And I think once our youngest daughter is out of high school, we're going to spend the whole fall there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You know, the place certainly allows it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You'd spend half the year, then.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, I'd like to.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You don't miss the city, then? I mean, if—

WOLF KAHN: Oh, I mean, if you have six months of New York, you—you have the city. [00:46:01] [Paul Cummings laughs.] Let's face it. You know, you have it up to here.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. You need the, uh, the relief.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You don't travel much anymore, do you, or have you been to Europe recently?

WOLF KAHN: Oh, yeah. We went to London last Christmas, and we go to the Caribbean. Oh, we live a nice life,

you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Sure. But I don't like to—to go on very long trips.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. I mean, you go to one place and stay there for a bit.

WOLF KAHN: Because it keeps—stay there for a while, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Um, I'd like to go back to Italy and—and—and settle there, and paint for a while somewhere, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: But, again, you—then your kids have to be older, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: This will all happen in three, four years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. It sounds very nice. [Laughs.]

WOLF KAHN: Yes, yes, it is. But, I mean, you know, family life takes—takes a big beating out of—out of—of—if you have any concern for your children. Um, on the other hand, if you don't care about, uh, uh, bringing your kids up as vagabonds, you know, you can be like Augustus John, who dragged them all over the world, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And look what happened to him.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, but I don't think it's good for your kids.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You know, your kids—kids thrive on stability.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You seem very involved in your family, though, much—much more so than a lot of other artists, actually.

WOLF KAHN: Yes? Well, I have a nice family.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You know, a good marriage.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Only married to one woman.

PAUL CUMMINGS: All these years.

WOLF KAHN: All these years. [Paul Cummings laughs.] You know, and she's an artist. She's good to have around.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: I use her a lot. She tells me when a painting is finished, sometimes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] That's how you find out.

WOLF KAHN: Well, you know, I mean, when I start getting—having the painting hang on the wall, and I start getting piddlier and piddlier on it, then she says, "Oh, that painting is really great. Why don't you just send it uptown?" And I say, "Oh, thank God. She saved me from myself." [00:48:00] [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's marvelous. What do you—you know, it's—it's, um—

WOLF KAHN: Avery was a good family man, too.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: You know, he didn't think that there was any—any conflict between being an artist and being a good family man.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: I mean, I—uh, I used to be a bohemian of sorts, you know, but it wasn't the happiest period of my life. I think I'm better off now than I was when I was in my early 20s.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, bohemian life is very, uh, exasperating, and difficult, and—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, and, you know, I—I—and also, I didn't really—I don't think I really enjoyed it. I wasn't made for it, I guess. You know, I just—just lived it because that's all I had.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right.

WOLF KAHN: [Inaudible] money to live right, and, uh, I wasn't mature enough to—to , uh, have enduring relationships. Uh, and I—I just, sort of, you know, went through a lot of changes then, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative]. Do you think that all affected your work in any way?

WOLF KAHN: In those days?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. I mean, was it something—

WOLF KAHN: Sure, sure.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —good that came out of it?

WOLF KAHN: I would like—I mean, one of the things in—in those days, um, uh, um, I wasn't interested at all in the things I'm interested in now. I'm interested in—in resolving things, you know. In those days, I was just interested in—in making them exciting.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Exciting for myself.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Like if I met a nice girl, I'd throw her over the next—the next—next girl I met, because I figured, you know, that would be—that's more exciting.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Novelty, newness.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. Right. You know, and then I found out it's really much nicer to—to, uh, build an enduring relationship. It's better. It allows you to—to be free to do other things. [00:50:01]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative]. Hmm.

WOLF KAHN: I mean, that's—you know, that's maturity, I guess.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. Who were the—who—you know, do you still have a lot of art—artist friends who you see, or are there new people, or pretty much the same ones you've seen over the years?

WOLF KAHN: I wish—I wish I—I wish I had more artist friends than I do.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

WOLF KAHN: I feel a bit bad that the community as—as—that I used to be a part of has been, you know, dispersed to the four winds as much as it has.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, like you said, Pasilis is selling jewelry now.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, selling jewelry in California. You know, and we were very close, and I was—all through the Hansa Gallery, I was close with a lot of artists. The gallery I'm with now, uh, I—none of the artists in the gallery are really my friends.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Um, but I'm—I'm very happy, for example, to have met Dine, who—who I think is a very fascinating person, and—and we have good times together.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Um, um, and, uh, then I have friends in Vermont, Frank Stout, and David Rohn is a good watercolorist up there, and, uh, um, I'm friends with quite a few of my students, you know, who've since left school and—and that I'm still keeping up with.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Um, but, uh, basically—well, I mean, you know, I'm friends with Ressa [ph], I'm friends with—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: —Georges, and I'm friends with other people of my persuasion, so to speak.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right.

WOLF KAHN: Uh, and I'm still friendly with, um, uh, the older guys, you know. We say hello to each other, and we like to see each other, uh, like—

PAUL CUMMINGS: But I mean—yeah.

WOLF KAHN: —[inaudible], and—and—and—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Just [ph] not around that much.

WOLF KAHN: —and Bill de Kooning.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Uh, Spaventa [ph].

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You know, but not—we don't really see each other socially all that much.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, they don't live—I mean, that whole proximity is gone. [00:52:01]

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, right, the proximity is gone.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you miss that, the fact that—

WOLF KAHN: I'm friendly with Bill King, who lives—you know, who works right downstairs from here.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You know? He's a swell artist.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But do you find that—

WOLF KAHN: I'm friendly with Mary Frank, you know, who—who I've known from way back. I mean, she goes right back to the Hansa days.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right. Do you miss that whole ambience, when there used to be so many people up and down Broadway, and 10th Street, and around?

WOLF KAHN: I think it—I think—yeah, I think I miss it. I think it would be better for me if I saw more artists, and still had, uh, um, uh, the arguments constantly that we used to have then, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: On the other hand, I don't miss it to the point where it stops me from doing what I want to do.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Otherwise, I suppose, I'd go out and—and—and look for it, although, again, as a family man, it's difficult—

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Cross talk], yeah.

WOLF KAHN: —to go out in the evening to bars and so forth, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. But there isn't any, anymore.

WOLF KAHN: Well, I'm sure down in SoHo, there's bars where you can go and meet—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Not so—yeah, but not—

WOLF KAHN: —meet people, you know, and—

PAUL CUMMINGS: They don't—they're all—people from Jersey come over to West Broadway. [Laughs.]

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. No, I'm sure there's artist bars. I mean, I know there are, where—where people still meet.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [Inaudible] Spring Street and places like that—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —but not, uh—they don't seem to be as gregarious as before.

WOLF KAHN: Well, I don't know. I—I have a feeling—I have a feeling it's normal.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: At a certain stage of life, you become more autonomous. You become more family-bound. You—you—uh, one of the things that I abhor, which also happens, is that artists tend to segregate according to economic level, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: All the rich artists hang out together, and all the poor artists [laughs] hang out together, and never the twain shall meet, because it's too painful, sort of.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: And I try to make, like, a real effort to, kind of, not get into that, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Because I think that's, sort of, antidemocratic. And—and I'm friendly, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah. [00:54:00]

WOLF KAHN: Anyway, I'm not that—that—that's—I'm not—not any superstar that—that, you know, just—just—just by dint of, uh, normal, uh, um, happenings, I just spend all my time with museum directors and—and big collectors, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And—and—and, you know, like, I imagine, uh, Jasper Johns does, although I don't know. [Laughs.] You know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: No, not really. Yeah. I mean, he spends a lot of time on his island, you know, not—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —accessible to anybody.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. Right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And I—the thing I find fascinating in talking to younger artists is that they have an admiration for the days up to the early '60s, when—when you could run into all the big guys, you know, and argue with them.

WOLF KAHN: Well, the big guys were—they really were very accessible, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, and they're not, anymore.

WOLF KAHN: And the reason they were accessible was because they're all—all, uh, liked to drink.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You know? They were all at the bars all the time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Uh, the people who didn't weren't as accessible. Like, Rothko wasn't very accessible, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Um, but Franz, and Bill de Kooning, and, uh, Milton Resnick, and all those people.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Inaudible] used to—

WOLF KAHN: They were always—always there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —come around a lot.

WOLF KAHN: You know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. Um, and they came to our shows.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: It was—it was a—there was much more cross-fertilization.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: But then we also had, like, a much more, I think, uncomplicated admiration for those guys.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Uh-huh [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You know, I think—I'm not quite sure how the young people feel about—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: You know, the other day I was at a panel. Let me just call Emily, because things are getting [inaudible]—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, right.

WOLF KAHN: —gallery, and one of the—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, oh, yeah, for the 10th Street exhibition.

WOLF KAHN: Yes. I was on this panel at the Nommo Gallery [ph], and Tom Hess was the moderator.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And, of course, the talk was all about, um, power.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: Power. I was—[they laugh] I was all upset, because it seemed to me, you know, that was an inappropriate subject. [00:56:03] And of course, the reason it was that subject is because Tom was there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: And they—sort of, using Tom as a shooting gallery, and as a, uh, complaining board, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, he was a big powermonger for years.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. And they feel like the—you know, [inaudible] such a thing as power, and they don't have any, you know, kind of.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], right.

WOLF KAHN: And—and they wanted to know, like, what we thought about power, and wasn't it unjust that all the power should be uptown.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: And, so a few hands—so—so it was all—all this talk about power. And enough—I finally got sore, and I said, "You know, why don't we talk about—about art and things that might conceivably have some bearing on our work, you know, because it's when you start thinking about power—you know, it doesn't do anything for your work. It just, sort of, sort of, dissipates your energy—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right.

WOLF KAHN: —and—and gets—gets you angry and upset, and takes the fun out of, uh, uh, out of doing your work." Um, but, uh, uh, somehow, you know, that was the overriding subject. [They laugh.] So then at—at—when the—when the panel was over, one of the organizers came up to me, a younger painter whom I had never met before, and he said, "Well, the most important part is that you're here." And I said, "What do you mean by that?"

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And he said, "Well, you—you were talking about how the older painters, um, in the 10th Street days, um, were available to the younger people. And, uh, uh, this is the first time you've ever made yourself available to the younger people—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: —that I know of, and that's very important for us."

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And I said to him, "Well, you know, I'm very easy to get along with. Just invite me again. I'll be available," you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: "I just don't necessarily feel invited, you know." [00:58:02]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right.

WOLF KAHN: And in fact, like, last year, they organized a show of realistic painters down in SoHo, you know, all these figurative galleries, the co-op galleries, and I—I put in my slides, and they didn't invite me to the show. I mean, [Paul Cummings laughs] clearly my work wasn't good enough for that show, you know. So I didn't feel—

PAUL CUMMINGS: But that was—

WOLF KAHN: —I mean, can you imagine—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —the figurative people, wasn't it?

WOLF KAHN: Yeah, I think, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The figgies, the new figgies, they call them.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. Right. Can you imagine, let's say, de Kooning, you know, being one of the older guys that's available, not being invited to—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: —or having to even submit slides, you know, and so forth? So—so, you know, I mean—

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Cross talk.]

WOLF KAHN: —they want it both ways.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, true.

WOLF KAHN: And, uh, I just think they've got a very mixed-up sense of hierarchy, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, it's all politics. It's not—

WOLF KAHN: Well, it's—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —that's a lot of it.

WOLF KAHN: It's also—it's also a little bit that the—there's the feeling, which you—you know, like—like D.H. Lawrence said about—in the studies on classical American literature, he said that the Americans say, "Henceforth be masterless," you know. And—and this is part of the American ethos, no doubt about it, you know. But you can't want to have to do with the older guys, who think they know more than the younger guys, you know—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right.

WOLF KAHN: —and who, effectively, do know more than the younger guys, you know, about certain things—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], right, sure, sure.

WOLF KAHN: —and have that attitude that you're going to be masterless. If you're going to invite the older guys —because we had—we had—when we were talking with Franz, uh, we loved him, you know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: We knew that he'd done something that we hadn't done.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right.

WOLF KAHN: Namely, he prevailed, you know. We were just upstarts, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: And still he was available. But he was available within a confine—within a context of—of affection —and—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

WOLF KAHN: —and uncomplicated admiration on our part, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah. It certainly is different these days. [01:00:01]

WOLF KAHN: And that—that's a bit what's missing. Yeah, you know. And then that's why I don't particularly feel terribly willing to go down there. I don't even know if they—if they know me, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. I think it's also that, you know, your description of one's attitude towards Kline was one of affection, basically.

WOLF KAHN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And now, I don't sense much of that.

WOLF KAHN: You mean, toward the older people.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. I mean, it's very—

WOLF KAHN: —competitive.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —careers, and competitive, and—

WOLF KAHN: Yeah. Yeah. Well, I—I—I didn't feel at all competitive toward Kline, because—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: —because I—I felt that he was a master, you know? I mean, how could I be competitive? I was barely out of art school, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah.

WOLF KAHN: Uh, it was a different—a different level of—of—of accomplishment, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: I imagine that there must still be some—some of that attitude around, because after all, it corresponds to reality.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: You know?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well—

WOLF KAHN: Careerism is something that's—that's—it's—it's drug in from nowhere in a way, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah. Well, it's—I don't know what it is anymore. I used to think I knew, and now I don't anymore.

WOLF KAHN: Well, I don't want to deplore the young.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

WOLF KAHN: That's a terrible—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I agree.

WOLF KAHN: —terrible game to get into.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I agree. It's so easy.

WOLF KAHN: Uh, I see a lot of very, very interesting work going on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], uh-huh [affirmative].

WOLF KAHN: And I think, um, uh, they still have the—the capacity to astound us, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I hope so. [Wolf Kahn laughs.] Anyway, that's—

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]