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Oral history interview with Sally Avery, 1982 February 19

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

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Transcript

Interview

Interview with Sally Avery
Conducted by Tom Wolf
At New York, New York
1982 February 19 & March 19

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Sally Avery on February 19, 1982 and March 19, 1982. The interview took place in New York, New York, and was conducted by Tom Wolf for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview was conducted as part of the Archives of American Art's Mark Rothko and His Times oral history project, with funding provided by the Mark Rothko Foundation.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

TOM WOLF: This is Tom Wolf. I'm interviewing Sally Avery at her apartment at 300 Central Park West, and it is Friday, February 19, 1982. Now, as I mentioned to you, Mrs. Avery, a lot of the purpose of this interview is to gather material on Rothko and on the relationship between your husband and Rothko and you and Rothko. So, to begin with, when did you first meet Mark Rothko?

SALLY AVERY: The first time we met Mark Rothko I think was in either 1929 or 1930. He was a friend of Louis Kaufman, a musician, who came from Portland, Oregon, where Mark was brought up. And Louis Kaufman was crazy about Milton's work and he was always bringing people to see it. One day he said to us, "I have an artist who came from Portland I'd like you to meet," and he brought Rothko over and Milton and he liked each other immediately.

MR. WOLF: I see.

MS. AVERY: At that time they were both showing at the place called the Opportunity Gallery, which was a small gallery subsidized by the City that gave opportunity to artists to show their work. And they gave monthly exhibits which were more or less judged by some well-known artist like Max Weber or somebody else of that caliber. And each artist would submit one or two works and both Rothko and Milton submitted and they were accepted. And that was the same place that we met Adolph Gottlieb. So after that we saw each other a great deal. In fact, we went away summers together and we became very, very friendly. At that time Rothko was a student of Max Weber at the Art Students League and meeting Milton really changed his idea of what art was all about. After that, he stopped going to the League and began painting on his own more.

MR. WOLF: Can you describe how that changed his idea?

MS. AVERY: Well, Milton's idea of painting was really quite different. It was more in line with what people think about painting today. He was interested in a flat surface and he used color as a means of expression. He was completely disinterested in photographic depth or mushy painting.

MR. WOLF: And Max Weber was more out of the Cubist school.

MS. AVERY: That's right. And that was a revelation for these young artists.

MR. WOLF: Yes, I can imagine.

MS. AVERY: And they used to come around our house almost every day to see what Milton had done that day and that stimulated their own painting.

MR. WOLF: Do you remember specific conversations they had?

MS. AVERY: Conversations...I can't say conversations because Milton spoke very little. He was not....

MR. WOLF: That's what I keep reading--Milton Avery never said anything.

MS. AVERY: He was not verbal at all. He was...but Rothko was very verbal, and he used to tell fabulous stories. He was a continual raconteur. Milton taught not by what he said but by what he did.

MR. WOLF: I see. So it was more the example of his work.

MS. AVERY: Yes, he taught by example rather than in any other way.

MR. WOLF: Now where was this Opportunity Gallery?

MS. AVERY: It was on 56th Street. I can't remember whether it was...it was between...it was in a small house which the city owned. And they had a gallery I think on the third floor. I can't remember. But it was a small gallery, and it was run by...they had hired a director whose name was Louise Gupfort. It's funny. I met her a few years ago again.

MR. WOLF: Oh, really?

MS. AVERY: Yes. And she had been married and had five children or something. But at that time she was a very attractive blond and all the boys loved her. She was a European woman, very charming.

MR. WOLF: But it wasn't her gallery?

MS. AVERY: No, It was run by the City.

MR. WOLF: By the City.

MS. AVERY: Called the Opportunity Gallery.

MR. WOLF: No kidding!

MS. AVERY: Uh huh.

MR. WOLF: There's not much...well, I guess the New York Cultural Center was run by the City so that's....

MS. AVERY: Yes. Now they've started doing things like that again. They had a little show there just recently. But this was...don't forget, at that time there weren't so many galleries where an artist could show. There were very few galleries. Well, this was a great opportunity for an artist to have a showplace and maybe attract the attention of a commercial gallery.

MR. WOLF: That sounds fascinating. In fact, I'll have to see what kind of information I can find out about it.

MS. AVERY: The Opportunity Gallery?

MR. WOLF: Yes.

MS. AVERY: Yes, it was a fascinating place.

MR. WOLF: I know someone who works in the City and she says they've got all kinds of arts information that no one's ever looked at. So was it a small space?

MS. AVERY: It was a room maybe...two rooms about this size. And they could hang about 20--the interesting thing was that you could submit every month and sometimes you got in and sometimes you didn't.

MR. WOLF: That sounds very nice.

MS. AVERY: And the artists got to know each other. As I say, the start of the friendship between Gottlieb and Rothko and Milton really was based a lot on the Opportunity Gallery.

MR. WOLF: That's quite a tribute to that gallery.

MS. AVERY: It was.

MR. WOLF: Also, one more question about Louis Kaufman. I read about him as being a big supporter of Milton Avery.

MS. AVERY: Yes, he was. He was a member of the Musical Art Quartet, which was a very fine quartet. And he played the viola in the quartet. But he was crazy about art. When all the other people in this quartet were buying cars and things, because they did quite well, he would come and buy paintings from us. I mean he never paid much more than $25 a painting, but the main thing was he thought Milton was so great and he would try to influence all his friends. He would keep dragging people down to see Milton's work. Very seldom sold anything but....

MR. WOLF: Did he buy other people? Did he buy Rothko also or anybody like that?

MS. AVERY: No, he didn't. Actually he didn't care for Rothko's work. And he had a collection. The quartet used to go to Europe each summer to play in Europe and he bought Modigliani, Mondrian and others. He had a very nice collection of European things. He didn't...I'm trying to remember what other Americans he bought. Oh, he had some Louis Eilshemius. I don't think he ever bought either Gottlieb or Rothko.

MR. WOLF: I know that you for quite a while supported your husband. But nevertheless it seems like from what you've been saying now and what I've been hearing that he did have a lot of support if he had these young artists coming around to look.

MS. AVERY: He had a lot of critical support. There was always a group of artists around who thought he was tops, including Mark Rothko who always thought he was the greatest painter in America. But he didn't have much support from either museums or collectors. Sales were really very few and far between, and some of the sales were just to artists who bought things for $25 because they loved his work.

MR. WOLF: Well, it is wonderful work. And Rothko as a raconteur you said, what kind of stories would he tell?

MS. AVERY: He would tell about his family in Portland and about...he was a very fascinating, interesting guy.

MR. WOLF: Did he have any reminiscences before he even came to the United States?

MS. AVERY: Yes, he used to talk about Russia. But he was only two years old I understand when he came to America, but he used to talk about it a lot.

MR. WOLF: What kind of things would he say about it?

MS. AVERY: Well, he'd tell stories about his father and his brothers and things like that.

MR. WOLF: Do you remember any of them?

MS. AVERY: No, I really don't. No. I remember once my mother was visiting me and she was absolutely fascinated. Rothko was there talking, you know, and she was just fascinated by his stories.

MR. WOLF: Why, just because he told them so well?

MS. AVERY: He really told them so well, yes.

MR. WOLF: And how about Gottlieb? Was he a story teller also?

MS. AVERY: No, no. He was not a story teller. Gottlieb was more like a businessman type, you know, very down to earth and wanting to be a success. Well, they all wanted to be successes. That's one thing they were all motivated by, the idea that they wanted to be a success.

MR. WOLF: Till they got to be successes and then it was a little different.

MS. AVERY: Well, Gottlieb I think enjoyed his success. I wouldn't say he was like...but Rothko had difficulty enjoying his success.

MR. WOLF: And then what was the last time you saw Rothko?

MS. AVERY: Well, the last time I saw him was really only a couple of weeks before he died. Milton was having a big exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum and, before the opening, Grace Borgenicht....

MR. WOLF: Oh, I remember that show. That was a beautiful show.

MS. AVERY: That was a beautiful show, yes. But Grace Borgenicht gave a big party at her house. She had a house on 95th Street and she gave this big party at her house. Then she hired buses to take people from her house to the Brooklyn Museum. And Rothko came to this party. And he had already been feeling very...I mean he was feeling very miserable. But he did come and he stayed a while and he was talking to...he was talking a lot to Maurice Sivan and he was saying that people didn't like his last work. He was doing those black and white things then because...which really were a sign of this depressed state that he was in. And he was saying nobody liked them and he felt artists were down on him. They weren't giving him the respect due to him. And then he didn't feel well enough to go over to the Brooklyn Museum. He just came to the party to pay homage to Milton and then he said he would go another time. And then the next week someone had provided me with a car to go over there and I thought I'll call Rothko. Then there was another artist who was sick...what's his name?

MR. WOLF: What's his work like?

MS. AVERY: Larry Calcagno. He had just had an operation and he was getting over it. I thought it would be nice to take him. I can take Rothko another time. But it was too late. The next week he committed suicide. I really felt badly about that, that I didn't....

MR. WOLF: Well, there's nothing you can do in a situation like that.

MS. AVERY: No.

MR. WOLF: He must have been tremendously demoralized in those last weeks anyhow.

MS. AVERY: Yes, he was, he was. And he shouldn't have been alone. I mean I really blame his doctor because he was going to a psychiatrist who didn't take seriously his threats of suicide. You really always have to take that seriously. He should have been, you know, put in a place where he couldn't harm himself.

MR. WOLF: He also made himself very difficult to be with in those days I gather.

MS. AVERY: Well, he was really sick and sick people have to be taken care of.

MR. WOLF: I wonder if it was physiological or totally psychological.

MS. AVERY: No, I think it was psychological. I don't know. I don't think it was physiological.

MR. WOLF: He had that operation.

MS. AVERY: He did have but he was considered in good shape. I mean the doctor said he was in good shape.

MR. WOLF: It's a terrible story. So in the early days do you remember him as being brooding and melancholy?

MS. AVERY: Well, he was...in the early days, it wasn't that he was so brooding. He was always a brooding type of person, but we just considered that was the Russian in him. No one thought of it seriously. I remember one incident that shows you how neurotic he was. He thought he was sick all the time. He thought he had cancer--I mean he was always imagining that he had these terrible diseases. And once he went into the hospital and stayed there three weeks and they did all sorts of tests on him; of course they didn't find anything. But it's an indication of how....

MR. WOLF: Yes, hypochondriac.

MS. AVERY: He was very much a hypochondriac.

MR. WOLF: And this was the whole time or only in the last years?

MS. AVERY: Well, this was early. This was when we first met him in the '30s. But there were lots of times when he was just great. I mean we would go away for the summer together. We'd take a place and then he'd get a place near us.

MR. WOLF: In Massachusetts, right?

MS. AVERY: Well, we went to Vermont. We went to Massachusetts, Gloucester. As a matter of fact, that's one of the places we went a few times. And we'd meet on the beach every day and go swimming and play handball and we had a lot of good, nice, wholesome times. And then in the evening they'd come over to see what Milton had...you know, Milton would show them work. And we'd have a cup of tea because that's about all we could afford.

MR. WOLF: And when was that?

MS. AVERY: That was like in '34, '32, '33.

MR. WOLF: And the Gottliebs went also?

MS. AVERY: The Gottliebs went too, yes. They'd get a place nearby.

MR. WOLF: It sounds wonderful. And everybody had a space to work?

MS. AVERY: Everybody had a space to work by themselves and in the evening we'd meet together or in the afternoon we'd meet on the beach and sometimes we'd all have dinner together and whatever and then sit around and talk. I mean there was nothing....

MR. WOLF: What kind of stuff would you talk about, art matters?

MS. AVERY: Mostly art. Mostly art. Discuss the kind of art everybody was doing. And then one summer Milton decided these boys were getting a little too dependent on him, so he decided not to show them anything. And they were very upset in the beginning but it was really very good for them because it forced them to delve into their own beings for their own ideas. At the end of the summer he showed them all his work but it wasn't this day-to-day thing that he had been doing, he had been showing them. So he'd show them things and the next morning they'd had an idea and they would use it. But this way they had to look into their own selves for their own ideas.

MR. WOLF: So he was really their teacher in a way.

MS. AVERY: He really was by his example. He was a terrific person. As you can see from his painting.

MR. WOLF: Oh, the paintings are beautiful. And I see the connection too. I mean it's pretty clear. But somewhere along the line that relationship must have changed because they weren't his disciples.

MS. AVERY: Yes, after the...it was really when they were so obsessed with the idea of getting attention and they decided to do these myth paintings, you know, Gottlieb and Rothko and Barney Newman. They were all going to do paintings based on myths. And that's the way they were going to attract attention. And they called Milton up and they wanted him to join them, but he said, "I'm not a joiner and I'm not interested in that." And Milton was really...he was really sort of...and he wasn't really interested in getting famous. I mean it was just a by-product of what he did rather than the main thing. He was really just interested in the next painting he was going to do.

MR. WOLF: But that myth painting then was really like a program in a way.

MS. AVERY: It was a program. Yes, it really was a program.

MR. WOLF: With Newman and Rothko and Gottlieb.

MS. AVERY: Yes. Well, Newman hadn't really started so much then. He was like a spokesman. He wrote about it. And it was only after he had written about it for a while that he decided he would get in the act too.

MR. WOLF: Yes. But it was pretty amazing to me that there was no.... I was just reading another interview with Katherine Schmidt and she was talking about Kuniyoshi and his teacher and how at a certain point he wouldn't have anything to do with Miller any more because he had to break away from him. But it seems like Avery was somehow tolerant enough or easy enough so they never even had to break away from him.

MS. AVERY: And see, even at one time even Gottlieb was doing like little Averys but then, you know, he began doing his own thing.

MR. WOLF: So, on these summer trips you said at night you would sit around and talk about art.

MS. AVERY: Yes, and look at pictures.

MR. WOLF: What do you mean, look at pictures?

MS. AVERY: Well, they'd look at Milton's paintings and discuss them, you know.

MR. WOLF: How would they discuss them?

MS. AVERY: Well....

MR. WOLF: You don't remember that?

MS. AVERY: I don't remember what. You know, they'd take them apart and say you had to do this and that. Well, actually Milton's paintings are full of painting ideas. I mean they're purely...they have no literary content. Even though they use recognizable subjects, what he did was so plastic that it's taken the world a long time to understand it. But the artists were understanding it way ahead of the general public.

MR. WOLF: Well, it's also very hard to talk about it because it's so....

MS. AVERY: And it's hard to talk about because it's much easier to talk about things that have some literary content.

MR. WOLF: Yes. That's why I'm interested if you can remember anything of how they would talk. About color specifically?

MS. AVERY: Yes, they talked about the color and the shapes and the forms and how Milton would make a brilliant color recede when it would normally come forward and things like that. But they would know this, but the general public wouldn't even know what they were talking about.

MR. WOLF: It must have been nice for him, too, to have his paintings...?

MS. AVERY: It was nice for Milton because, without that support, I don't know how he would have continued to paint for so long without any kind of official recognition. The worst people were the museum people. They never understood anything. They're still having a hard time.

MR. WOLF: Well, it's getting easier.

MS. AVERY: It's getting easier. But, you know, I won't mention the name of the museum director, but just recently a museum director said...I was at a dinner party and he was my dinner partner. He said to me, "It's only recently that Milton's become important, isn't it?" I mean how stupid can you be?

MR. WOLF: Important to whom? But then did Gottlieb and Rothko show their paintings also?

MS. AVERY: Yes, they would show theirs too.

MR. WOLF: And what kinds of...?

MS. AVERY: Mostly they were interested in seeing what Milton did.

MR. WOLF: Gee, that's really unusual in that kind...that everybody was so open and it doesn't seem like there was a lot of ego there, you know, that they were happy to learn from him and he was happy to give to them.

MS. AVERY: Well, they realized...I mean he was really changing their whole concept of what art was all about.

MR. WOLF: Yes. They....

MS. AVERY: Milton was very open. I mean he was perfectly willing to show everything he did because he realized...I mean he didn't think you could really copy--he was never concerned, and he wasn't concerned with it.

MR. WOLF: I think that's the truest attitude. If you're really doing something yourself, then you can't really be imitated. It's your own.

MS. AVERY: That's true.

MR. WOLF: They called him about these mythological paintings. Do you remember when that was?

MS. AVERY: It was in the '40s, early '40s. And they wanted to know if he would come along and do some of these, but he wouldn't. He didn't want to do it.

MR. WOLF: He had his style pretty well developed then and his subject matter pretty well...?

MS. AVERY: Well, he wasn't interested in it, that's it. And the other thing was, he was not a joiner. They had this group of ten and they wanted him to join them but he didn't. He really didn't want to be anyplace where he could be pressured to conform in any way to anything that was not his own choice.

MR. WOLF: But did he associate with the members of The Ten?

MS. AVERY: Sure, he associated with them. It was very friendly, always friendly with all of them.

MR. WOLF: But he just wasn't part of that kind of public protest and stuff like that?

MS. AVERY: Yes.

MR. WOLF: Did you visit Rothko's studio over the years?

MS. AVERY: Well, in the beginning his studio...what he had was this tacky little apartment. When we first met him, he was living with Louie Harris in an East side tenement with the toilet in the yard or something.

MR. WOLF: Where was that?

MS. AVERY: Someplace down on the East Side. I don't remember. Up three or four flights.

MR. WOLF: East 6th Street?

MS. AVERY: Maybe that's it. Yes. One of those.

MR. WOLF: They wanted me to ask you if there was an elevated train by where he lived.

MS. AVERY: There was an elevated train by where we lived when we first met him because we lived where Lincoln Center now is, and the 9th Avenue elevated went right by our place. But he lived...let's see now. When we moved to 72nd Street, he got a place right across the street from us and we used to go back and forth. You know, he was at our house every night till one day he said, "You have to come over to my place. I'm going to make the tea tonight." So we went over. It was just across the street. He worked there and lived there. He served us this tea and I said, "Mark, this tea tastes very funny. What did you do with it?" He looked over and said, "Oh, my God, I made it in the same pot I cooked my glue."

MR. WOLF: He wasn't married at that time?

MS. AVERY: No, he wasn't married.

MR. WOLF: That's a real bachelor kind of thing.

MS. AVERY: No, he wasn't married. But then he brought this girl, Edith Thacter, to see us, and he said he was going to marry her. She was a beautiful girl. He married her, but that was a very bad marriage from his point of view, and from hers too I guess.

MR. WOLF: It didn't last long or did it?

MS. AVERY: It lasted about seven or eight years, I guess.

MR. WOLF: Oh, that's a while.

MS. AVERY: And she had him making jewelry. You know, she wasn't exactly sold on him as a painter.

MR. WOLF: That's bad.

MS. AVERY: So he was unhappy and she was unhappy. She's married now, living in New Jersey someplace.

MR. WOLF: What kind of jewelry was he making?

MS. AVERY: Silver jewelry. He said he was very upset because he felt like an errand boy. She was sending him to the bank, and she was making money. She'd sometimes make $900 a week, so she really was...and she was sort of lording it over him.

MR. WOLF: So it was her jewelry business?

MS. AVERY: It was her jewelry business.

MR. WOLF: Oh, I see. That sounds like a bad situation.

MS. AVERY: So he was very unhappy. Huh?

MR. WOLF: That sounds like a bad situation.

MS. AVERY: It was a bad situation, yes. But he was crazy about her and she was really a beautiful girl. But he said it was like living in a refrigerator for a long time.

MR. WOLF: Sounds terrible. So you think he was crazy about her because she looked so good?

MS. AVERY: She was beautiful. And then he married Mel, but that wasn't such a great marriage either. Maybe he was just difficult to live with.

MR. WOLF: Well, that sounds like it was the case. It sounds like you, though not living with him, but certainly in awfully close proximity to him for a very long time.

MS. AVERY: Yes, we were.

MR. WOLF: Were you taking care of him a lot?

MS. AVERY: Oh, no.

MR. WOLF: He could take care of himself.

MS. AVERY: He could take care of himself.

MR. WOLF: It doesn't always sound like it.

MS. AVERY: Well, for a while he was happy with the second marriage, especially when he had this little boy. He was crazy to have a son. But I think what was very bad was they both began drinking a lot. And, you know. But then we went to Provincetown. He came to Provincetown and he bought a house there. So we saw him quite a bit up in Provincetown.

MR. WOLF: When was that?

MS. AVERY: But that was later. That was in the '50s.

MR. WOLF: Did he ever go up to Woodstock?

MS. AVERY: He had been to Woodstock when we were there. Let's see, the Gottliebs had a place in Woodstock and we used to visit them a lot. I'm trying to remember whether Rothko ever got a place in Woodstock. I don't remember him coming to Woodstock, to tell the truth.

MR. WOLF: Well, then he probably didn't.

MS. AVERY: But I'm sure he came when they had that conference there in 1950 because I think he spoke.

MR. WOLF: Which conference was that?

MS. AVERY: They had an art conference in Wood stock. I think it was either 1950 or 1951. I think it was 1950, and artists from all over came. Did he stay with us? I can't remember. But actually we started going to Woodstock because we were visiting the Gottliebs. They had a place there for the summer. We'd go up for weekends to see them.

MR. WOLF: And when was that?

MS. AVERY: That was in the early '40s. A

MR. WOLF: I didn't even realize they were up there, the Gottliebs.

MS. AVERY: Yes. And then we went to Vermont and the Gottliebs came up and Rothko. He must have come up too. Wherever we went, they used to sort of follow.

MR. WOLF: Yes, it sounds like it was a close-knot trio.

MS. AVERY: Yes.

MR. WOLF: This apartment where he made the tea, can you describe that a little?

MS. AVERY: It was just a two-room place on 72nd Street. It was nothing special.

MR. WOLF: And he was painting there too?

MS. AVERY: Yes.

MR. WOLF: What did his paintings look like then?

MS. AVERY: Well, remember he was doing those subway scenes, things like that.

MR. WOLF: Yes.

MS. AVERY: It was before he had...I think before he was doing the myth paintings because we were living there, I remember.... We lived there in 1930, about '30 to '32, those two years. Then we moved. We moved to 79th Street.

MR. WOLF: Did he ever say what motivated him to choose the subway as a subject?

MS. AVERY: Probably he was on the subway and he looked around and saw....

MR. WOLF: He was in a lot of other places, too.

MS. AVERY: I mean it doesn't have to be a deep psychological mystery.

MR. WOLF: No, but I mean he wrote about those mythic paintings. They wrote they wanted their work to have meaning.

MS. AVERY: He was a terrific idea man. And what they were looking for was a tragic subject that was universal. I mean, he had really a great line. And it was a very deliberate thing and they wanted to attract attention.

MR. WOLF: Well, that was a genuine intention of theirs to try to get tragic, universal paintings. So that's why, to me, at that retrospective of his the most surprising were the subway paintings because they're not universal. They're New York City.

MS. AVERY: That was long before he had the mythic idea.

MR. WOLF: So I wonder what he thought he was doing there?

MS. AVERY: Well, he was just painting then. He didn't have any idea in his mind. It was just, you know, whatever came along.

MR. WOLF: They are kind of moody anyhow, those subway paintings. It's not like the hustle-bustle of the subway.

MS. AVERY: Did you like that show?

MR. WOLF: Yes. I saw it again in Los Angeles and I liked it a lot more there because the walls were square. It makes a lot of difference.

MS. AVERY: Well, I thought they overloaded it with those late paintings. There were too many of them and they nullified each other. I said to Messer afterwards...he asked me how I liked it. I said, "Tom, if you showed half as many paintings, it would have been twice as good," because to me they began to look like blankets.

MR. WOLF: Yes, it was a little much.

MS. AVERY: Too repetitious. It was too commercial in a way.

MR. WOLF: But also they're made I think for rectangular walls, like at the Duncan Philips Gallery where they have that room. That's so nice when they're all around you instead of running down that spiral.

MS. AVERY: Yes, that is hard on paintings.

MR. WOLF: Did he ever discuss acrylics with you?

MS. AVERY: No. I don't remember that he discussed acrylics. I didn't even know that he was using acrylics at the end.

MR. WOLF: Did you visit his studio at the end?

MS. AVERY: No.

MR. WOLF: Or his last studio?

MS. AVERY: No, I never visited his last studio.

MR. WOLF: Did he ever explain how he wanted his paintings exhibited?

MS. AVERY: Yes, he certainly did. He was always talking about that. He wanted them exhibited then with very little light. He wanted them in sort of a moody dark light, and he was very particular about who was next to him because he felt that a painting.... I know he always said that a painting could be injured by the painting that was hanging next to it.

MR. WOLF: So who did he like next to him?

MS. AVERY: Another Rothko I guess.

MR. WOLF: Probably so. They all seemed to like that in that generation.

MS. AVERY: He used to say, "Milton, you're not selective enough. You let your paintings be hung anywhere." Milton said, "What do I care? Once I've painted them, I'm not interested in it." But Rothko thought that was wrong. And the other thing he thought was wrong would be Milton didn't give impressive titles to his paintings. That was another thing.

MR. WOLF: Well, when was that? Because he started numbering his paintings for a while.

MS. AVERY: Well, that was before he was under the influence of Newman. Newman gave those big long...you know.

MR. WOLF: I know, very pretentious titles.

MS. AVERY: Yes, pretentious.

MR. WOLF: Do you remember an example of him being unhappy with how a painting was hung or something like that, or who he was next to?

MS. AVERY: I just remember him talking about it. I don't remember any specific example. But it was one of his favorite topics of conversation.

MR. WOLF: Yes, I read that too, about wanting to be with the dark light. That makes a lot of sense.

MS. AVERY: And it is true because, when his paintings are shown with too much light, it destroys that mysterious quality because the paint has sunk into this unsized canvas and the light bleeds whatever quality they have, bleeds it away.

MR. WOLF: Yes, I agree. You look at them for a little while and the colors really start to work on your eyes, and that's better with subdued light.

MS. AVERY: Yes.

MR. WOLF: So who were the artists that he most admired while you were associating with him?

MS. AVERY: Well, I can't remember that he spoke about anybody. I know he loved Milton's work.

MR. WOLF: Yes. How about Matisse?

MS. AVERY: I think he liked Matisse. I think he liked Picasso. I think he lied Giacometti. I think he liked...you know, he liked all the really good artists--Bonnard.

MR. WOLF: That makes sense.

MS. AVERY: And any artist that was good in color he would naturally respond to because he had an elegant color sense until those...I don't consider those black paintings part of his oeuvre because he was so sick then.

MR. WOLF: Well, I must disagree with you there because I think they're terrific.

MS. AVERY: You like them?

MR. WOLF: Yes. I think they're really melancholy and powerful and subtle in their color too. You know, those different tans and browns I think are very subtle, a lot of them. But I'd like to see them again. I haven't seen them in a while. But how about of his contemporaries; who were the artists he liked other than Milton and...?

MS. AVERY: I think he liked Gottlieb. He associated with him a lot. I think he had his reservations about Newman.

MR. WOLF: I read he was almost a little jealous of Newman.

MS. AVERY: Yes, because he felt he had stolen a lot of ideas from him. I don't know who stole from whom. But personally, I don't think art is an idea. I think there was some feeling between him and Newman.

MR. WOLF: And it seems in the later years all those abstract expressionists--it was kind of sad the way they started feuding and everything.

MS. AVERY: I know. I know.

MR. WOLF: It's really too bad.

MS. AVERY: Because they had had such a play and then they were losing their power and they all got panicky.

MR. WOLF: Because the younger artist were coming up.

MS. AVERY: Yes, and they were discarding them.

MR. WOLF: So that probably bothered him too.

MS. AVERY: It did. It did bother him a lot. It really did.

MR. WOLF: It's too bad because it's not like he was being displaced. It's just that other things were developing.

MS. AVERY: That's right.

MR. WOLF: How about his reading? Do you remember anything?

MS. AVERY: He read incessantly. Once he was writing a book, too, and he would bring chapters over and read them to us. He wanted to get...at that time I think he was thinking of maybe getting a PhD.

MR. WOLF: In what?

MS. AVERY: In art, and he was writing this book about art. He would come over and read chapters to us. It was very involved and intellectual. I don't know about intellectual, but very involved. And after he read it a couple times, I said to Mark, "I don't even understand one word you're saying because it's so convoluted." He said, "This is the way you have to write if you want to get academic recognition."

MR. WOLF: I disagree with that. I think that's an unfortunate thing. I think the really good academics are the ones who write clearly.

MS. AVERY: Well, I didn't know enough....

MR. WOLF: A lot of people think that, a lot of people.

MS. AVERY: But I think after a while he gave it up.

MR. WOLF: When was that?

MS. AVERY: That was in the '30s.

MR. WOLF: And it was kind of art theory?

MS. AVERY: That's when he was married to Edith Thackner. She was pushing. She wanted to make some money. She was very driving and she wasn't going to hang around with him if he didn't do something. So he was pushed into it.

MR. WOLF: So that was kind of a theory of art or something?

MS. AVERY: Yes, something like that.

MR. WOLF: And about the reading then, do you remember what kind of things he liked to read?

MS. AVERY: I don't remember what, but I know he read a lot. He was really a Russian intellectual.

MR. WOLF: One of the reasons they want me to ask that question is because they've been told over and over again that he didn't read anything but mystery stories.

MS. AVERY: Oh, I didn't know that.

MR. WOLF: I don't know if it's true.

MS. AVERY: Milton only read mystery stories. I never knew about Rothko.

MR. WOLF: I have my doubts myself, but so far they haven't found anybody who can remember him reading.

MS. AVERY: Well, he read Plato. I remember because a lot of his theories were taken from Plato, like size is implicit in...that size had a relationship to beauty and the bigger the thing the more beautiful it gets. And that's one of the reasons he started doing big canvases. So I know he read the philosophers.

MR. WOLF: And how about fiction? Do you remember any of that?

MS. AVERY: I don't remember any fiction, but I remember him discussing and discussing Plato. I remember that.

MR. WOLF: That thing about the bigger it is the more beautiful it is...?

MS. AVERY: Yes?

MR. WOLF: Clement Greenburg was talking about that. Was he in evidence in those days?

MS. AVERY: Yes, sure. Clem, he used to live around the corner. We knew him. Actually, he wrote about Milton as early as the early '40s but he didn't really get the message until really 1960.

MR. WOLF: Well, he is a critic who evolved. He started in one place and developed.

MS. AVERY: That's true.

MR. WOLF: Was he in contact with Rothko and Gottlieb?

MS. AVERY: Yes. I'm trying to think. Did he include them in "Art and Culture," that book he did?

MR. WOLF: Yes, in some of the essays. He was studying with Hofmann and I think that was a little bit of a different crowd.

MS. AVERY: The Hofmann crowd?

MR. WOLF: Yes. I don't know.

MS. AVERY: Yes, that is true, but they all knew him and Harold Rosenberg. I mean they all were....

MR. WOLF: And they were meeting at The Club downtown?

MS. AVERY: Yes, at The Club. They were very active in The Club. That was the other thing. They wanted...Milton didn't want to join The Club.

MR. WOLF: Did you go to any of the meetings?

MS. AVERY: I went to a few of them. They were fun. I went to one meeting where there was a short meeting on Milton they showed at the Club. You know, it was really fun for the artists because they got together as purely an art group, and then they used to invite museum directors and important collectors down too. So they got to know all the people that could help them.

MR. WOLF: It sounds like a lot of fun.

MS. AVERY: It was.

MR. WOLF: It sounds like something that couldn't happen today.

MS. AVERY: You know why I think it can't happen today? Because everything is too expensive. You can't get an empty building for nothing and hold meetings in it. They'd want to charge you $800 a meeting or something.

MR. WOLF: And also the art world has expanded so much. We talked to this guy, Carl Fortess.

MS. AVERY: I know him.

MR. WOLF: He said that back then...we said so-and-so knows so-and-so. He said back then everybody knew everybody.

MS. AVERY: That's true. You knew every artist. But now....

MR. WOLF: There's so many more.

MS. AVERY: Yes. And the other thing is, there are so many more buyers too. I mean all these corporations are buying things for their offices. So a young artist can knock out a lot of things and sell them and have a big loft. What kind of art do you do?

MR. WOLF: I'll tell you some other time.

MS. AVERY: Okay.

MR. WOLF: That's still fairly rare though. It certainly happens more now than ever before.

MS. AVERY: See, when we were starting, no one thought about selling because there was no opportunity to sell. So that wasn't part of the things you were thinking about. You were only thinking about making a good painting or an interesting painting, but you never expected to sell it.

MR. WOLF: I think that's one of the major changes in the art world today. The most successful painters going are turning 30 and back then it was just out of the question.

MS. AVERY: That's right. That's absolutely true.

MR. WOLF: Which I think probably helped that sense of artist community too.

MS. AVERY: Yes. Once you start selling, you begin to get very competitive.

MR. WOLF: And the jealousies. SALLY WOLF: All sorts of other things.

MR. WOLF: How about the Foundation? Did he mention his plans for the Foundation?

MS. AVERY: Well, the only thing I remember is he was talking about helping older artists and he wanted to do something for them, because he had made some money and he knew how tough it was. As a matter of fact, a couple of my friends did get...right after he died, George Constant and Gershon Benjamin I know got grants of two or five thousand dollars from the Foundation. And it was very much appreciated, not only from the money point of view, but from the approval. You know, sort of a seal of approval in getting it.

MR. WOLF: Well, sometimes it seems like there's a thin line between an artist who's a millionaire and an artist who's worked just as long and hard and who is in poverty.

MS. AVERY: That's true.

MR. WOLF: I think the artists understand it better than anybody else.

MS. AVERY: And so you think, I've been so lucky, I want to help somebody else.

MR. WOLF: So you think that that was clearly Rothko's intention then?

MS. AVERY: I think so. I'm sure also one of his basic ideas was also to perpetuate himself too. I mean he had a very strong ego and he wanted a place in posterity. But I think you assure yourself of that by your work rather than by any other thing you can do.

MR. WOLF: Yes. Well, it seems like he's certainly done that. Let me just do this one more time. You remember him talking about the Foundation?

MS. AVERY: I remember him saying that he wanted to help older artists. I don't remember him saying that he was going to do something.

MR. WOLF: And who else did you know at the time who knew Rothko? Well, it sounds like you must have known a lot of people who knew Rothko.

MS. AVERY: Yes.

MR. WOLF: Who was close to him among the artists?

MS. AVERY: Clyfford Still was very close to him and he actually brought Clyfford Still down to see us when he first met him. He was very taken with Clyfford. He thought he was brilliant and liked his work and he was very fond of him.

MR. WOLF: When was that?

MS. AVERY: That was in the '40s, the early '40s, when Clyfford still lived in New York. He came to New York and he lived here for a few years. He lived on Cornelia Street in a little tenement, a three-room tenement with a toilet in the hall. He had broken up with his wife and didn't have any money. But he did have a Jaguar. He was crazy about that car.

MR. WOLF: Do you remember what his work was like then, Clyfford still?

MS. AVERY: It was very much like...you know, very similar to what...as far as I know, that's the only kind of work I've seen of his.

MR. WOLF: The jagged forms.

MS. AVERY: You know, he used black a great deal, very dramatic. I think Rothko had met him when he was out in San Francisco teaching and they got to be very good friends. And he was very friendly with Gottlieb but at the end they had a couple of little disagreements, I guess. I don't know if hey were so friendly at the end. But for

years he was thought of as his best friend.

MR. WOLF: I see. Newman was friendly with Gottlieb too.

MS. AVERY: Oh, sure. Newman and Gottlieb, when I first met them, they lived together in a little tenement. Newman was teaching. Barney was teaching in high school. Adolph wasn't teaching because his father gave him an allowance, I think.

MR. WOLF: But they weren't like a trio, Newman and Gottlieb and Rothko?

MS. AVERY: Well, for a while, when they were showing at Betty Parsons, Newman was like a spokesman for Rothko and Gottlieb. He was a brilliant guy and I think he helped a lot to attract attention to what they were doing by his writings.

MR. WOLF: He must have been a great talker too from what I've heard.

MS. AVERY: Oh, he was terrific. He never stopped, but he was very interesting and very witty. He also was a great fan of Milton's. The only painting he ever bought was a Milton Avery.

MR. WOLF: Oh, really? But he and Rothko weren't so close I guess.

MS. AVERY: Well, they were in the beginning. But then at the end, when he began painting, both of those boys, both Rothko and Gottlieb, they never considered him a painter and they thought it was a little presumptuous on his part to start painting and then attract so much attention with the ideas which they thought were theirs, I think. So I think that was the basis for it. Then Newman did so well on his own, it upset them a little bit.

MR. WOLF: And what was Still like? From that I gather, he was the most....

MS. AVERY: The only thing I remember Still talking about was his Jaguar. He would come to see us. He liked Milton's work. He said to Milton, "We are both doing the same thing," which I thought was a little.... But he used to come see us and he'd sit there. He could take his Jaguar apart and put it together again. He was very...and Milton loved cars, so they were...he was delighted to listen to him.

MR. WOLF: From what I've read by him, he sounds like he was a little megalomaniac.

MS. AVERY: Yes, he was really a little crazy.

MR. WOLF: But he was then already?

MS. AVERY: Yes. And at that time, he wouldn't let anybody see his work. If collectors came, he would make them wait outside and then finally he would show them one work and that's all. Then he'd tell them to leave.

MR. WOLF: There are artists who do that today too, and it seems to be attractive to a lot of people.

MS. AVERY: Yes, it's amazing how attractive it is to a lot of people.

MR. WOLF: It's like playing hard to get.

MS. AVERY: Yes. They think, if it's hard to get, it has to be good. Although that doesn't follow at all.

MR. WOLF: How about other people that Rothko was close with, other than Still, Avery, Newman? Was Pollock in there at all?

MS. AVERY: If he was, I didn't know about it. Because after that, 1945, we didn't see Rothko so much any more.

MR. WOLF: Why is that?

MS. AVERY: Well, I mean he got wrapped up in the myth paintings. We just didn't see each other.

MR. WOLF: How about de Kooning?

MS. AVERY: No, we were never friends. We knew de Kooning. We had dinner with them once or twice, but we ever were really close to de Kooning. I don't know if Rothko was either. He may have.

MR. WOLF: I guess de Kooning and Pollock were kind of a different crowd.

MS. AVERY: Yes. They were the East Hampton crowd. I know they all used to go to the Cedar Bar, but Milton never drank so he never went to any of those bars. He just didn't like drinking at all.

MR. WOLF: Did you go to the Cedar Bar?

MS. AVERY: I went once just to see what it was like but I never went back. I knew all those guys that went. I think he was very friendly with Stamos.

MR. WOLF: Oh, yes.

MS. AVERY: And I think he began to go around.... Instead of being friendly with artists, he began to be friendly with collectors like Donald Blinken and people like that. He changed his orientation.

MR. WOLF: It's too bad. In a way exactly what he needed was something like what he was to Milton Avery with some younger artists who were really....

MS. AVERY: Who would worship him.

MR. WOLF: Yes.

MS. AVERY: That's right. But I don't know if he could have...he couldn't have tolerated that I think because he would have thought they were stealing from him because he was paranoid in that sense.

MR. WOLF: Do you own any works by Rothko?

MS. AVERY: No, I don't.

MR. WOLF: Do you have correspondence from Rothko?

MS. AVERY: I can't remember that he ever wrote me a letter.

MR. WOLF: They have these two photographs of early Rothko paintings and they wonder if you know who they are. Mother and Child. They think it might even be you.

MS. AVERY: It might be, but I never saw it before so I don't really know. What year was it done, do you know?

MR. WOLF: They didn't say.

MS. AVERY: It looks like it might be me.

MR. WOLF: You don't remember ever posing?

MS. AVERY: I never posed for him, but he might have made sketches.

MR. WOLF: There seems to be a lot of that early work around that no one's known about until recently.

MS. AVERY: I never saw these works.

MR. WOLF: They are quite reminiscent of Milton Avery.

MS. AVERY: They're reminiscent of Milton.

MR. WOLF: I guess that's one of the reasons they say it's before Rothko was a father, so it must have been somebody else.

MS. AVERY: It might have been me, but I don't know because I never saw them. But it looks suspiciously like me.

MR. WOLF: Because you had Your hair like that?

MS. AVERY: Yes.

MR. WOLF: And this one's with two children. I guess it's two children.

MS. AVERY: I think this one was in the country. In Gloucester the kids used to come around. Or he could have just made it up. This one looks as though it might be me but I don't know about the other one.

MR. WOLF: Can you describe the relationship between Rothko and Gottlieb?

MS. AVERY: They used to call each other every day or see each other. They were very, very close.

MR. WOLF: And talked about painting?

MS. AVERY: Yes, I'm sure they talked mostly about painting. They were like real buddies.

MR. WOLF: And did that ever grow apart when they started getting successful also?

MS. AVERY: I think in the end it grew apart. It's very hard for two prima donnas to be together.

MR. WOLF: Yes. Well, I guess they were very valuable to each other in the early years. I know they used to go to the Metropolitan Museum together and stuff like that.

MS. AVERY: Yes, sure. They were really very close friends and they respected each other's painting and each other's judgment. So that was real good.

MR. WOLF: So when Rothko started doing those mythic paintings, did he talk about myths in general or specific myths?

MS. AVERY: Well, they used to read about them. They'd each read about.... Actually, they would read the same myths and interpret it in a different way. So it was interesting.

MR. WOLF: You don't know what myths or what they were reading?

MS. AVERY: I knew they were Greek, the Greek myths.

MR. WOLF: Probably just the standard stories of Greek mythology.

MS. AVERY: Standard mythology, you know.

MR. WOLF: Do you remember when you first saw those paintings of his, those mythoclassical paintings?

MS. AVERY: I saw them at the Betty Parsons gallery, at a show there.

MR. WOLF: I see. You don't remember when that was?

MS. AVERY: I think it was in the early '40s. Well, that's easy to document.

MR. WOLF: And did you go to the opening?

MS. AVERY: I probably did. I don't remember. We used to go to all the openings.

MR. WOLF: How did you like the show?

MS. AVERY: It was interesting.

MR. WOLF: How did it go over?

MS. AVERY: Well, I think they got some publicity on it which is what they wanted. They managed to get what they wanted, which was good.

MR. WOLF: So that was really the start of them getting together?

MS. AVERY: Yes.

MR. WOLF: Where do you think they got the idea to act like that? From the European movement?

MS. AVERY: I think Rothko always read Greek philosophy and it was just.... You know, where do ideas come from? They come out of the air and he thought it was a good idea because they were searching around for something to hang their work on to. And this seemed to them...they decided that trivial subjects couldn't make important paintings, which was very wrong. You can make a painting out of anything. So they wanted to get tragic subjects. They felt that would make an important painting.

MR. WOLF: I wonder if the surrealists were behind that or de Chirico or something like that because he's got that to a degree.

MS. AVERY: Maybe, I don't know. I really don't know.

MR. WOLF: Were they talking about people like that?

MS. AVERY: I remember Gottlieb was talking about Dali. He thought Dali was a great painter. I said, "You must be joking." He said "No, I'm not joking."

MR. WOLF: That's funny.

MS. AVERY: And then for a little while he began to do paintings influenced by Dali--just some small....

MR. WOLF: Those little still lifes?

MS. AVERY: Yes.

MR. WOLF: And how about the other surrealists? I know there was a big surrealism show at the Museum of Modern Art.

MS. AVERY: Andre Breton when he was in New York before the war ended, 1940. They came over here.

MR. WOLF: I guess Max Ernst was here and Tangue.

MS. AVERY: Yes.

MR. WOLF: But they weren't part of the same circle, though?

MS. AVERY: No, no, they weren't. But they were aware that they were here.

MR. WOLF: And do you know of any contact between Rothko and the surrealists? I know Motherwell had contact with them.

MS. AVERY: Motherwell did, but not...I think Rothko was friendly with Motherwell. They both were intellectually inclined. I remember for two summers he had a house in Provincetown and I think he used to see Motherwell then up there.

MR. WOLF: So, yes, maybe the surrealists....probably the surrealists. I know de Chirico was doing Ariadne and all those mythic figures. Masson was into it. I guess Masson was here too.

MS. AVERY: Yes, he was. He was showing at Rosenberg. I remember him particularly because Rosenberg liked his work a lot.

MR. WOLF: Did Avery show at Rosenberg?

MS. AVERY: Yes, and Rosenberg used to talk to Milton about Masson.

MR. WOLF: How did Milton feel about that? How did you feel about that? This sudden European invasion you could call it?

MS. AVERY: I thought it was great. I mean it focused more attention on art and made people more aware of art. Don't forget, in those days no one sold anything anyway, so there was nothing to be competitive about. It was more pure interest in art.

MR. WOLF: That sounds great. And how about politics? What was...do you know how Rothko felt about the Second World War?

MS. AVERY: I don't think he was politically...I don't remember him ever talking about politics.

MR. WOLF: But everybody must have been affected by what was going on during the War.

MS. AVERY: You mean depressed by it?

MR. WOLF: Yes.

MS. AVERY: The artists were always in a depression so it didn't make any difference.

MR. WOLF: How about the WPA?

MS. AVERY: They were all on the WPA for a while and it sort of helped a little bit.

MR. WOLF: Did they have good feelings about it?

MS. AVERY: I don't know. Milton was only on for a couple of months.

MR. WOLF: Briefly.

MS. AVERY: Very briefly, and he didn't want to get involved with it. But I think they were on it for two or three

years.

MR. WOLF: And did they talk about it later? Did they think it was a great....

MS. AVERY: They thought it was a good idea. They thought it was great. It did stimulate a lot of artists and help them get over a bad time.

MR. WOLF: It seems like it certainly was.

MS. AVERY: It really was a great thing.

MR. WOLF: But I know in Woodstock it got very political. It got into factions and jealousies started developing because there was money involved, I guess, or something.

MS. AVERY: The minute money rears its ugly head, people start fighting.

MR. WOLF: I guess so. Do you know if Rothko visited the Gallatin collection?

MS. AVERY: I'm sure he did. Everybody did. It was a great collection. Of course he must have visited it.

MR. WOLF: Where was it, down at...?

MS. AVERY: NYU. It was down at NYU.

MR. WOLF: And did he mention any particular works?

MS. AVERY: You mean in the Gallatin collection?

MR. WOLF: Yes.

MS. AVERY: I don't remember if he went down with us, but I know every artist in New York went down there.

MR. WOLF: And how about in general? Do you ever remember any works, specific works, that he was thrilled with or anything like that?

MS. AVERY: I can't remember.

MR. WOLF: I asked you if you remember if his apartment in East sixth Street overlooked an elevated train. They've got early paintings of an elevated train so they want to see if they can pinpoint them.

MS. AVERY: East 6?

MR. WOLF: 303 East Sixth Street, probably at the corner of Second Avenue.

MS. AVERY: I was in that apartment. And he had a house on 95th Street and he lived in...I remember when he was down on 27th Street.

MR. WOLF: It says here that he was on...what she told me was that he was there from '36 to '41. When you said on the lower East Side, I imagine....

MS. AVERY: Yes, that's where it was but I don't remember the elevated there. I remember visiting him there, but I don't remember any elevated there.

MR. WOLF: Well, actually they could just get old City maps and find out if there was an elevated there. They don't have to have you wracking your brain about it. And you said it was a small, two-room apartment?

MS. AVERY: Yes.

MR. WOLF: And he was painting there?

MS. AVERY: Yes. He was doing some paintings, not the big ones. He didn't do those big paintings until much later. He had a place up on the West Side. He was living next door to Harold Diamond at that time.

MR. WOLF: Who's Harold Diamond?

MS. AVERY: Harold Diamond is a...oh, you might interview him for this. He's an art dealer, private art dealer. He lives in this building, and he lived in the same sort of tenement on the West Side where Rothko lived. That's when Rothko first began doing these big paintings on unprimed canvases. He used to do four or five in a day,

and then he'd wrap them up and send them to the storage. And he used to go and see him all the time, So he would have a lot of firsthand information about that particular thing.

MR. WOLF: That's interesting. But he didn't deal in them? They were just neighbors?

MS. AVERY: He was just a private dealer and he only was selling things for $25. Now he only sells things for half a million dollars. But I think it would be a good source for you because I remember now him talking about how he'd go in there and Rothko would be just finishing with the big rag rubbing these big things. He did the work today and then he'd wrap them up and send them to the.... That was in...I'm just trying to think of what year it was. Maybe the early '50s.

MR. WOLF: Milton Avery worked very rapidly too, right?

MS. AVERY: Yes, he worked very rapidly.

MR. WOLF: That probably had an influence on Rothko.

MS. AVERY: I don't know. I don't know how...but yes, Milton worked rapidly.

MR. WOLF: Or at least Rothko had a precedent that you can make a lot of paintings fast and they can still be good.

MS. AVERY: Yes, that's true.

MR. WOLF: Let me show you some of these photos. They want me to show you these and see if you remember anything about these mythoclassical paintings, like when they were done or...?

MS. AVERY: Sure. They were done around the '40s. This is '38. That's the beginning of the mytho thing. This is still the subway thing.

MR. WOLF: Do you remember any kind of subject?

MS. AVERY: I remember the subway paintings very well....

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1]

MR. WOLF: Now these subway paintings; again it seems like a funny subject to me. You don't have any idea about what his thoughts were about, why he was showing subways?

MS. AVERY: That's a self-portrait.

MR. WOLF: Yes.

MS. AVERY: No. I think he was just using material that was at hand, that's all.

MR. WOLF: Almost like the Ash Can School. They were painting subways to a degree.

MS. AVERY: Not necessarily, no.

MR. WOLF: Not necessarily, but Sloan did a lot of paintings of the El.

MS. AVERY: Yes, but that's the El, not the subway.

MR. WOLF: Outside, not inside.

MS. AVERY: That's right. These are interior subjects.

MR. WOLF: And the only one that comes to my mind offhand is George Tooker who did subway scenes but in a different way.

MS. AVERY: Very different. I mean he attempted to be painterly in these things which George Tooker never did. And this is the beginning of the myth series.

MR. WOLF: Do you have any memories or any ideas of the...?

MS. AVERY: This is a little related to the pictographs of Gottlieb, you know, compartmentalized.

MR. WOLF: This is Plate 24 that we're talking about. I see what you mean by that, how they were working in a

common vein.

MS. AVERY: Yes.

MR. WOLF: But you don't know what he had in mind by putting these faces up there.

MS. AVERY: No, I really don't. These look like friezes from Greek buildings. It could be related to that, and these might be the Greek gods, you know.

MR. WOLF: Did you ever see him working on any of these?

MS. AVERY: No, but I knew when....

MR. WOLF: Or on the subway paintings?

MS. AVERY: I never saw him actually...I never watched him work but we saw the subway paintings when he was doing them and we saw these when he was doing them.

MR. WOLF: What did he have to say about them?

MS. AVERY: Well, he was looking for a tragic, universal type of thing that would have meaning to a lot of people, you know, to have a universal appeal. And he felt that the Greek myths were a good base to start from.

MR. WOLF: This is then the sacrifice of Iphigenia. I don't see that he could only be reading mysteries all the time.

MS. AVERY: That's right. How could he know all this? I never heard of that! Why did they say that?

MR. WOLF: Well, somebody said that was their impression.

MS. AVERY: And here he's beginning to turn into the bands, using the bands more definitely. And you can see how he evolved from this into what he finally did.

MR. WOLF: This is Plate 31.

MS. AVERY: '44, yes.

MR. WOLF: So was he happy about these paintings or was it like a painful kind of...?

MS. AVERY: Well, I don't know. I told you he was never happy.

MR. WOLF: He was like a sufferer.

MS. AVERY: He was a natural sufferer. Let's put it that way. He enjoyed suffering. I remember this one. These were little, weren't they?

MR. WOLF: There are sizes--79 by 40 inches. Well, that's a good size.

MS. AVERY: That's a good sized one. But he did a lot of small things like this on...like studies.

MR. WOLF: On paper?

MS. AVERY: On paper, yes.

MR. WOLF: That's in "The Wasteland," T.S. Eliot. Thyreisias.

MS. AVERY: So he had to have read T.S. Eliot too.

MR. WOLF: Yes, or he could have gotten it straight from the ancient Greeks. But you don't remember him talking about T.S. Eliot or anything?

MS. AVERY: No, but we used to read T.S. Eliot a lot. Milton liked to read poetry out loud. And we all used to read sometimes at night. We'd read poetry.

MR. WOLF: You mean when you were together with Rothko?

MS. AVERY: Yes.

MR. WOLF: So what kind of poetry?

MS. AVERY: T.S. Eliot was one of the favorites. And what's his name, the Blue Guitar? Stevens.

MR. WOLF: How about Yeats or anybody like that?

MS. AVERY: We didn't read Yeats so much. This is the whole series when they were battling for a place in the sun.

MR. WOLF: Well, they succeeded.

MS. AVERY: They sure did.

MR. WOLF: And I guess Gottlieb was working along with this?

MS. AVERY: Gottlieb began working first on the pictographs and then on other mythic things. Then he finally evolved with that buret which looks like the sun, energy.

MR. WOLF: Was Milton Avery happy to see them find their own ways?

MS. AVERY: Sure. He certainly was. He was delighted.

MR. WOLF: Do you think they had any influence on him reciprocally later on?

MS. AVERY: They might have. I don't know. I think one influence I would say, their doing big canvases finally forced him into doing some big canvases.

MR. WOLF: Some of those late paintings of his which I think are wonderful of just the beach and real stark and simple, maybe some of that simplicity is encouraged by Rothko.

MS. AVERY: Maybe he gave him the courage to do it.

MR. WOLF: They are wonderful paintings.

MS. AVERY: Did you see the one we are giving to the Whitney? Sea and Dune #2?

MR. WOLF: Is that in there?

MS. AVERY: Yes. It's on permanent display now. It is such a fabulous painting.

MR. WOLF: It's a beautiful painting. It's a little strange to me too because there's a lot of black in the water.

MS. AVERY: Yes.

MR. WOLF: That's what I noticed that makes it kind of unreal. I love those sea paintings of his, and they do remind me of Rothko's late ones which to me are landscapes.

MS. AVERY: Yes, but his color is muddy.

MR. WOLF: Yes.

MS. AVERY: And Milton never used muddy colors.

MR. WOLF: I agree with that. But I think if you're painting earth then there's a reason to make the color muddy.

MS. AVERY: That's a literary reason. It's not an artistic one.

MR. WOLF: Well, I don't think my thinking is wrong. I think you can do different things and I think you can have literary reasons and they still work.

MS. AVERY: But muddy color doesn't work for an artist.

MR. WOLF: That's true. So did they talk about things like muddy color?

MS. AVERY: Yes. Milton didn't go into it deeply but he would criticize muddy color.

MR. WOLF: I've got a terrific visual image in my mind now of you and Milton Avery and Mark Rothko and Gottlieb sitting out on the each at night reading poetry together.

MS. AVERY: Yes.

MR. WOLF: That's amazing. It would be great to have a movie of that. So what else did you read? Do you remember any thing else that you were reading out there?

MS. AVERY: Hmmmm....

MR. WOLF: Sort of like a historic moment, you know.

MS. AVERY: Of course, Milton always read...he liked reading out loud. Once he read me all of "Swan's Way" out loud.

MR. WOLF: All of "Swan's Way?" That's a great book.

MS. AVERY: It took about two years.

MR. WOLF: I know. I'm still working my way.

MS. AVERY: See, that's very closely related to some later things. Then he gradually eliminated what was in front of this.

MR. WOLF: Oh, I see. Something like that?

MS. AVERY: No, that was before we met them at Provincetown. See, one of the advantages of having very little money is that you have to provide amusement for yourself. That was before television. You had to do something in the evenings. You worked all day. We'd read aloud or read poetry or do things like that.

MR. WOLF: It sounds like a more....

MS. AVERY: I'm afraid I'm going to have to stop.

MR. WOLF: Okay, What time is it?

MS. AVERY: We'll talk about that next time.

MR. WOLF: Next time, okay.

[Part II of the interview was conducted on March 19, 1982]

TOM WOLF: This is Tom Wolf continuing the interview with Sally Avery. Today is March 19, 1982 and we're at her apartment at 300 Central Park West. When I went through the interview, I picked out a few things that seemed interesting to me that I wanted to find out a little more about--about Rothko. One thing you mentioned is that he told stories about his family in Portland. Do you remember any specifics about that?

SALLY AVERY: I remember that his brother was mayor or some sort of official.

MR. WOLF: In Portland?

MS. AVERY: In Portland, yes. But I would say I don't remember too much about it. I remember more the stories he told about Yale. He was very unpopular there and he was very unhappy there.

MR. WOLF: Why was he not popular?

MS. AVERY: Well, he was very Jewish and Yale was very Waspish. And he was hardly an acceptable figure and he was very bored with the curriculum. And he just felt like sort of an odd fish. That also may have been part of his make-up, his attitude, so he saw the worst in his relationships with these boys at Yale. And I really can't blame him.

MR. WOLF: Well, it's difficult years for a sensitive adolescent basically. But when he came to New York then he wasn't so much an outsider?

MS. AVERY: He left Yale I think in the middle of the term. Just couldn't stand it. He knew some people in New York. In fact, one of the people we knew, Louis Kaufman, a violinist, came from Portland and he knew Rothko. He actually brought him over to our place. He knew his family. That was the beginning of our relationship with him.

MR. WOLF: So you don't remember any specific stories that he told about Yale?

MS. AVERY: No.

MR. WOLF: Was he involved with art then?

MS. AVERY: No, he wasn't involved with art then. He came to New York and went to the Art Students League. I think he was just in a humanities course at Yale. As far as I know, he was not involved in art.

MR. WOLF: Something else you mentioned. You may remember we were talking about The Club.

MS. AVERY: Well, The Club was much later. That was down on Eighth Street and, by that time, Rothko knew all the artists in New York and he was very much a part of the scene.

MR. WOLF: Part of the community, yes.

MS. AVERY: And actually he was probably one of the founding members, he and Barnett Newman. Barney was always thinking of ways to accelerate the attention artists got.

MR. WOLF: Well, to a certain degree some of these abstract expressionists were kind of public-minded and publicity-minded.

MS. AVERY: Yes, they were, very.

MR. WOLF: It's interesting because some of these younger artists today we were talking about are certainly amazingly career-minded. They certainly take care of business but I guess that's not so new. The audience is bigger.

MS. AVERY: Well, an artist has to survive. Milton happened to be completely disassociated with that kind of thing because after all....

MR. WOLF: You were looking after him.

MS. AVERY: I was taking care of the financial end so he wasn't concerned about it. I don't know if he ever would have been concerned about it; maybe he would if he had had to.

MR. WOLF: Well, probably yes. So you said that once at The Club they showed an Avery film?

MS. AVERY: Yes. There's a short film that was made by Walter Lewison, a 35mm. It runs about 13 or 14 minutes, and he did it in 1952. They needed new things each week. They had meetings one a week. So one meeting they decided to show that. And we went down and it was very well received.

MR. WOLF: Were there a lot of people there?

MS. AVERY: Well, maybe there were 75 artists.

MR. WOLF: That's a lot of people.

MS. AVERY: That's a lot for that time. It was just an old loft. Then, after they had a little entertainment, then they'd sit around and talk about art and discuss things.

MR. WOLF: What kind of issues were they talking about?

MS. AVERY: Well, they talked about the art scene, the dealers, always against the dealers naturally.

MR. WOLF: Right.

MS. AVERY: And the museum directors, usually against the museum directors too. The policies of the museum. I remember one time they picketed the Modern Museum. Why did they picket the Modern Museum?

MR. WOLF: I think they picked the Whitney because they weren't showing enough recent American artists.

MS. AVERY: They also picketed the Modern Museum.

MR. WOLF: Is that Avery film still around?

MS. AVERY: Yes, I have a copy.

MR. WOLF: Does Barbara Haskell know about that? Did they ever show that?

MS. AVERY: Yes, she has a copy. I mean I loaned it to her. I expect it back. You know, it might be an idea for the Archives to get a copy of it. They could have a copy made, because it's an interesting film. My daughter appears in it, I appear in it, my dog is in it. And Milton's paintings are in it. He doesn't speak though.

MR. WOLF: But he appears in it.

MS. AVERY: He appears in it. He's the main show. But he doesn't say anything. The narration was taken from an essay that Frederick S. Wight wrote for the Baltimore Museum show. A beautiful piece of writing....

MR. WOLF: Is it black and white or color, the film?

MS. AVERY: It's color.

MR. WOLF: Good. Well, that's important. A couple more things about Rothko. Do you remember him working from a model?

MS. AVERY: He used to have a sketch class once a week at our house in those days because we couldn't go out. We had a little child. So....

MR. WOLF: Which days were those? What year?

MS. AVERY: It was in the late '30s, early '40s. We had a model come and each artist, if the model cost $10, we'd just split it among whoever was there, including ourselves. So it used to cost maybe a dollar a piece or something like that. And Rothko came a few times, but he really wasn't...he didn't enjoy sketching. Actually he used to say he hated to paint. It wasn't a pleasurable activity for him. Milton just loved painting, you know, the most enchanting thing he could do. So, after a while he stopped coming to the sketch class because he really didn't get a kick out of drawing.

MR. WOLF: So he hated to paint. He just wanted the results.

MS. AVERY: I don't know. You know, it was hard to tell with Rothko, whether he said things for effect, which he did lots of times, or whether he really meant what he said. But that was one of the things he always said: he hated to paint. Well, some artists I guess hate to paint but they keep on at it.

MR. WOLF: Yes. They hate it worse when they don't. And that sounds like a melancholy temperament once again.

MS. AVERY: Yes, he had a melancholy temperament.

MR. WOLF: It sounds typical. So who were the other regulars in this sketch group?

MS. AVERY: Some of them you wouldn't know. Wally Putnam used to come all the time. Once in a while Gottlieb would come but he also didn't really enjoy sketching too much. Well, he enjoyed it more than Rothko. And Lou Harris and Byron Browne used to come.

MR. WOLF: Byron Browne--he's a Woodstock man, isn't he?

MS. AVERY: I don't know where he went in the summer, to tell the truth. He wasn't that close like the other fellows, but we knew him. Then after a while, when March got older and she could stay by herself, we sometimes went over to his studio.

MR. WOLF: Whose?

MS. AVERY: Byron Browne's and had the sketch class over there. He had a place on Ninth Street. But in the beginning the sketch class was at our house.

MR. WOLF: And then, when it went to Byron Browne's, was it still basically the same circle of people?

MS. AVERY: Well, there were some more people, you know. I mean it went up and down. Always there was like, say, a basic three or four that came every week. Then there would be three or four that would come sometimes and sometimes they wouldn't.

MR. WOLF: And who were the basic three or four?

MS. AVERY: Well, Milton and me and Byron. He loved to draw. He was always drawing. And George Constant used to come sometimes. Do you know him?

MR. WOLF: I think that's a familiar name.

MS. AVERY: He used to come quite often. He was pretty steady.

MR. WOLF: How about Jack Kufeld?

MS. AVERY: Oh, Jack Kufeld. He came a couple of times but he was not really an artist. He was just sort of a...I mean he was an artist for a few years or something. He was very funny. He sort of appeared. I don't know where he appeared from. Then he sort of hung around a lot and sort of insinuated himself into the group. But he was never, never considered much of an artist.

MR. WOLF: But he was one of The Ten, right?

MS. AVERY: No, he wasn't one of The Ten, no.

MR. WOLF: Oh, I guess he told some other interviewer that Rothko and Avery and some of the others from The Ten were in a group sketching from the nude.

MS. AVERY: Where, at our house?

MR. WOLF: I guess that was it.

MS. AVERY: But he was never one of The Ten. And Milton was never one of The Ten. Milton never joined anything. He didn't like to join. But they were all our friends, all the ones--Gottlieb, Rothko. Was Lou Schanker one of The Ten?

MR. WOLF: Yes. I think so.

MS. AVERY: They were all friends of ours.

MR. WOLF: I've got that list. Was Lou Schanker in the sketch class though?

MS. AVERY: One in a while he'd come, yes. But Milton, I mean they asked him to join but he just didn't like being part of a group.

MR. WOLF: The sketch class was always from the nude?

MS. AVERY: Always from the nude except if the model didn't show up. Then we would take turns posing.

MR. WOLF: And always from a female nude or a male nude?

MS. AVERY: Sometimes we'd get a male nude but we actually liked the female nude better.

MR. WOLF: Because it's the great tradition?

MS. AVERY: Not only that, but I think it's more fun to draw a woman.

MR. WOLF: Curvy.

MS. AVERY: Curvy. Men are straight up and down and that makes it more difficult. But we did once in a while have a male.

MR. WOLF: How about John Graham? Did he enter into any of this?

MS. AVERY: Oh, yes. He used to come. He was a very good friend of ours. He loved Milton, crazy about his work, and he lived just down the block from us. We knew him a long time. We knew him when he was first married to that girl from Baltimore. I've forgotten...Gibson? What was her name?

MR. WOLF: I don't know her name.

MS. AVERY: And he had a child who is now--- [Unintelligible] And we knew him through a series of different wives until he got married to that rich woman at the end. But he was a very colorful character, a brilliant man. He came to see us all the time.

MR. WOLF: He was also influential on Rothko I guess.

MS. AVERY: He was a very good friend of Gorky's. They were both Russian, could speak Russian. And he also was one of the first people who formed African collections. He formed an African collection for Crownenshield.

MR. WOLF: He seems to have been very avant-garde.

MS. AVERY: Yes, a brilliant guy. He always used to write letters. I don't know if I kept them.

MR. WOLF: That would be very interesting if you did, for the Archives.

MS. AVERY: He got really crazy at the end when he hated Picasso. He wrote us this letter that was incredible.

MR. WOLF: That would be very interesting. Those would be interesting to see. What was the general impression of him, that he was brilliant, right? That he was knowledgeable?

MS. AVERY: Well, he wrote that book. You have the book. He wrote that book, "Dialects in Modern Art" or something. He gave me a copy. In fact he gave me a little painting once of his.

MR. WOLF: That's nice. Do you still have it?

MS. AVERY: Yes, I still have it. In storage.

MR. WOLF: Maybe I could take a look at it? I like looking at paintings. Why did he make all his figures cross-eyed?

MS. AVERY: Oh, because he said all beautiful women...he gave me that lecture. All beautiful women are slightly cross-eyed. That was his theory. So he made all his women....

MR. WOLF: That's a less intellectual explanation than I expected. But his art was taken seriously as well?

MS. AVERY: Well, yes, because he had a show at the Dudensing Gallery when he first came to America. Actually someone brought him up to see us and he was really sort of amazed. He was one...I mean he recognized Milton's work as being exceptional immediately. I know I told you that story of how he brought Gorky and Stuart Davis up to see us.

MR. WOLF: No, I don't think you told me that.

MS. AVERY: He was just crazy about Milton's work and so one day he called up and said, "I want to bring Gorky and Davis up to see your work. I think they should know you." So he brought them up and they came in. You know, Gorky used to wear this long overcoat that went down to his ankles. He was about six feet two. He always wore the collar turned up because he was conscious of how dramatic he looked. You know, when he walked down the street, everyone would turn around and look at him. So they came and they sat on the couch and Graham began showing them different paintings of Milton's. They sat there with their arms folded. Neither of them said a word and they just sat there. Finally, after he had shown them 10-30 canvases, Gorky got up and walked over to one of the canvases hanging on the wall. He stood there looking at it and Milton thought, ah, he's finally going to say something. And he did. He said, "Milton, where did you get that frame?"

MR. WOLF: Brother! And that was it?

MS. AVERY: And that was it.

MR. WOLF: That's funny. So there wasn't much of a relationship between...?

MS. AVERY: No. We got to know Gorky pretty well. We went to parties at his house where he would read poetry, Russian poetry.

MR. WOLF: In Russian?

MS. AVERY: He'd read it in Russian and then he'd translate it, yes.

MR. WOLF: And was he melancholic also?

MS. AVERY: Yes, he was always melancholy. But he and Graham and I guess it was Davis, they used to go around a lot together.

MR. WOLF: And were they connected with Rothko?

MS. AVERY: Not so much. He wasn't...they weren't that closely connected.

MR. WOLF: Because he had that Eastern European background also.

MS. AVERY: Yes, but he came when he was one year old. Don't forget that Gorky and Graham came when they were mature. So it made a big difference. Even though Rothko was born in Europe, he had no background. He was a year old when he came, or something like that. And he certainly didn't ever speak Russian.

MR. WOLF: I guess Davis was pure American too.

MS. AVERY: Yes but, for some reason, they hung around together.

MR. WOLF: Well, I guess he was very French-oriented at least. He had a big European orientation.

MS. AVERY: Yes, that's right. He had lived in France.

MR. WOLF: Also, Jack Kufeld said Rothko had a studio across from you on 72nd Street.

MS. AVERY: He did.

MR. WOLF: And you had a lot of contact with Rothko then?

MS. AVERY: Yes. He used to come over every night or every day.

MR. WOLF: And look at the work again?

MS. AVERY: Yes. He had moved out of his...well, he was alone. And then once we went over to his place. He was going to give us some...he said, "I'll make you some tea." So he proceeded to make some tea and served it with a couple cookies, I think, and it tasted horrible. I tried to drink it. I couldn't drink it. I said, "What did you put in this tea?" Mark--at that time we used to call him Marcus--said, "I didn't put anything in it." He went over and he looked at the pot that he had boiled the water in and it was the same pot he had boiled glue in to size his canvases. So that's why it tasted so horrible.

MR. WOLF: And this is after his first marriage?

MS. AVERY: He hadn't been married yet.

MR. WOLF: Oh, this is before.

MS. AVERY: Actually, it was before his first marriage. And it was about that time that he met Edith whom he later married, a very beautiful girl. He wasn't very lucky in marriages.

MR. WOLF: That brings me to one thing that was on my mind. You said he was putting glue on his canvases. Later on you were talking about unprimed canvases.

MS. AVERY: Unsized canvases. Well, that's it. Later he painted on canvases which didn't have any sizing on them. And when you don't have sizing on it, the canvas soaks up the color and it gives that particular kind of radiance that you see sometimes in his canvases. But the only trouble is later it eats up the color.

MR. WOLF: It's also very fragile.

MS. AVERY: Usually after he did a canvas he sent it to the restorer and maybe the restorer put something on the back to retard that eating up.

MR. WOLF: So what years was this?

MS. AVERY: Oh, that was in...that wasn't in 1932. That was later after he was with Peggy Guggenheim for a while in Art of this Century. It was after that. He already was selling a little bit, so he could afford that.

MR. WOLF: Did he talk about that process?

MS. AVERY: What, about...?

MR. WOLF: About painting directly.

MS. AVERY: Yes. I mean we could see it. You don't have to talk about it. It was very obvious if you know about painting. Milton tried it once or twice but he didn't like it because it wasn't...it destroyed the permanency of the canvas.

MR. WOLF: And this was with oil paints?

MS. AVERY: Yes. And the oil paint would sink right in.

MR. WOLF: That's interesting because there's this whole thing about stained canvas, you know, which says Pollack started it with his black and white paintings and the Helen Frankenthaler picked it up. But they don't say anything about Rothko. He was doing it right along.

MS. AVERY: He was doing it, yes.

MR. WOLF: But he didn't see that as a big innovation. It's just something that he developed.

MS. AVERY: Maybe he did it after they started. I really don't know. But I know he did it.

MR. WOLF: And why did he do it?

MS. AVERY: Because you get a certain kind of effect when you do that. You can take a rag and go over canvas and cover a huge surface very quickly, and it gives you a certain kind of effect that you can't get if you paint.

MR. WOLF: Yes, very thin.

MS. AVERY: Yes.

MR. WOLF: But Avery painted very think and you see texture and....

MS. AVERY: I know. Milton did it, but he didn't do it on unsized canvas. He painted very thinly most of the time.

MR. WOLF: Did he gesso the canvas?

MS. AVERY: Yes.

MR. WOLF: Well, that's a good way to work. Then you have the light coming through all the time.

MS. AVERY: Yes.

MR. WOLF: Then the other thing that stayed in my mind too is that you were saying that sometimes Rothko did four or five paintings in a day.

MS. AVERY: I didn't say that.

MR. WOLF: Well, maybe you didn't, but did he?

MS. AVERY: He might have done....

MR. WOLF: He painted fast.

MS. AVERY: Small ones. Yes, and sometimes he did those big ones, three and four at a time. That's true. Yes, I remember it.

MR. WOLF: And Milton Avery did the same thing. He would paint very quickly.

MS. AVERY: Yes. Usually, if he did three or four, they were either water colors or small pictures.

MR. WOLF: Rothko?

MS. AVERY: Milton. But I mean he couldn't do that every day.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 2]

MR. WOLF: This is Tom Wolf continuing the interview with Sally Avery on March 19 at her apartment on Central Park West. One thing that came to my attention is that Rothko taught at Tulane for a while. Do you know anything about that?

MS. AVERY: I know he had various teaching jobs but I don't know just where.

MR. WOLF: There was that one at Brooklyn.

MS. AVERY: Originally he used to teach in a settlement house. That was his first job.

MR. WOLF: Where, what settlement house?

MS. AVERY: Well, there was one in the Bronx, maybe the East Side Settlement or something. And that was one of his first jobs, teaching in settlements, which he hated. Then he also taught over in Brooklyn at a settlement house. Then, the minute he started selling pictures and making enough money, he dropped those jobs.

MR. WOLF: But he had that job at Brooklyn College that he....

MS. AVERY: Well, that he didn't have very long. He lost that because he insisted on talking about other things than art.

MR. WOLF: Or they didn't like his style of painting or something like that?

MS. AVERY: I don't think it had anything to do with his painting. He said he used to come and start talking about his family.

MR. WOLF: Why did he do that?

MS. AVERY: You know....

MR. WOLF: He didn't have anybody to talk to? I don't know.

MS. AVERY: I don't know. Anyway, he didn't like...he didn't care about teaching there. But it was the first time he was going to have a real salary. That part was....

MR. WOLF: At Brooklyn?

MS. AVERY: At Brooklyn, yes, because they paid pretty well at Brooklyn College.

MR. WOLF: Yes, it sounded like he didn't want to leave it. From that Seldes book...they talked about it a little bit, that he was unhappy that he had to go.

MS. AVERY: Because it meant a certain kind of security.

MR. WOLF: Something else I've heard about him is that, late in his career, he started teaching at Hunter and had a very unhappy time there.

MS. AVERY: Really? I didn't know that he taught at Hunter.

MR. WOLF: This is just like art world gossip from artists. But they said he went back and taught at Hunter and the students didn't really have a lot of respect for him and they didn't really know who he was. He was very disappointed.

MS. AVERY: He was very conscious of needing approbation all the time. He wanted to be treated like a genius or a great man. I remember once Harold Diamond meeting him on the street. Harold told me this. He sort of, you know, "Hi," you know. Rothko said, "Don't talk to me like that. Treat me with respect." He was very, very unhappy at being sort of just hailed like an ordinary person.

MR. WOLF: That sounds a little unrealistic. And that was in his later years?

MS. AVERY: Yes, that was in his later years.

MR. WOLF: I was told that someone to interview about him is George Rickey, who was head of the department that he taught in when he was at Tulane.

MS. AVERY: Oh, yes.

MR. WOLF: You don't know anything about that?

MS. AVERY: No, I don't know anything.

MR. WOLF: I think we're just about through with the Rothko stuff except, do you have any other reminiscences about The Ten?

MS. AVERY: Well, we used to all meet together at the director's house or apartment. He used to give a little party and it was like a little miniature club. And, even though Milton didn't show with them, we were always included because they were all friends.

MR. WOLF: Who was the director?

MS. AVERY: I can't remember his name now.

MR. WOLF: The director of The Ten, the leader of The Ten?

MS. AVERY: Yes. He wasn't an artist. He ran the gallery. It was a little gallery where they showed.

MR. WOLF: It wasn't this guy Howard Putzel?

MS. AVERY: No, it wasn't Howard Putzel. That came later. Putzel was later. And only Gottlieb showed with Putzel, I think.

MR. WOLF: So what were the main galleries that these artists were interested in? I know that Gottlieb had his first show at Dudensing.

MS. AVERY: Where?

MR. WOLF: Dudensing, because that was with Konrad Cramer.

MS. AVERY: Oh, yes. That was a long time ago, he did.

MR. WOLF: Sure was.

MS. AVERY: Yes. I had forgotten about it. I was thinking that Putzel was the first one.

MR. WOLF: Where was this apartment that you would meet with The Ten?

MS. AVERY: Down in the Village someplace where he lived. Godsoe. His name was Robert Godsoe.

MR. WOLF: And he was a dealer; he wasn't an artist?

MS. AVERY: He was a dealer. Well, he also, after a while, after The Ten disbanded, he gave up the gallery because they didn't have enough money to really run it. He got a job running the book shop in the United Nations Plaza. But he was very much interested in art and he would have liked to have stayed in the art business. But there was no business.

MR. WOLF: Not in those years.

MS. AVERY: Unfortunately.

MR. WOLF: These days there is but not then.

MS. AVERY: So he was a nice guy, very interested in trying to promote these young artists.

MR. WOLF: And why did The Ten disband?

MS. AVERY: Because they didn't have enough money to keep going.

MR. WOLF: I had the impression that it was more of a group united because of their beliefs in a certain kind of art rather than financial consideration.

MS. AVERY: You're absolutely right. They were united in certain kinds of beliefs about art, but someone had to pay the rent for the gallery. They weren't particularly interested in finance, but when there wasn't enough money to run it, they couldn't contribute very much because none of them was making any money.

MR. WOLF: Where was the gallery?

MS. AVERY: They didn't...I don't know if they actually had an actually gallery or that he got alternate spaces to show the paintings. I can't remember that, whether there was an actual room someplace that they got. It seems to me there was. He was very adept at talking people into something so he might have gotten someone to give them a room but it was nothing very grand. But they did put in a little ad for The Ten. I don't think they were together for more than a year or two.

MR. WOLF: I see.

MS. AVERY: But they made a little splash.

MR. WOLF: Well, they're in the books now. Was Mondrian much of a factor in those days?

MS. AVERY: No. Mondrian was a real loner. Oh, Boris Margo, was he part of The Ten, too?

MR. WOLF: I'm not sure. I wish I had that list with me.

MS. AVERY: Well, he was friendly with Mondrian. As a matter of fact, he let him use his studio. He had a studio on 59th Street and Central Park. When he went to the country for the summer, he turned it over to Mondrian. But Mondrian was not a joiner. He was very much a loner.

MR. WOLF: And also hung around with the Europeans.

MS. AVERY: Yes, yes.

MR. WOLF: But were people very aware of him being there?

MS. AVERY: Well, I know Valentine Dudensing was very enthusiastic about him. He didn't have any money. He was very poor. Dudensing finally arranged for someone to maybe pay him a couple hundred dollars a month so he could live. Then he got pneumonia and died. He wasn't too old either.

MR. WOLF: Was Milton...?

MS. AVERY: Dudensing had arranged a show for him.

MR. WOLF: Was Milton Avery interested in his work?

MS. AVERY: In Mondrian's?

MR. WOLF: Yes.

MS. AVERY: Not particularly.

MR. WOLF: Was Rothko? I know Newman talked about him a lot.

MS. AVERY: Newman was more interested, because it had a more intellectual bent to it, though Mondrian in the beginning was a very really romantic artist.

MR. WOLF: I know. He had a long career.

MS. AVERY: Yes.

MR. WOLF: I know Newman kept saying how his work was not like Mondrian's. Obviously he was very aware of Mondrian and wanted to....

MS. AVERY: Yes. Newman would. As I said, the boys never considered him much of an artist.

MR. WOLF: Yes. Well, I consider him quite an artist. There are four of his paintings on view now down in SoHo.

MS. AVERY: Where?

MR. WOLF: This thing called the DIA Foundation, which is this wealthy Texan family, the DeMeniles.

MS. AVERY: Oh, yes.

MR. WOLF: And they just rent spaces and put up these big simple works of art. They're really into simple works of art. So down on Wooster Street now there's a white space with four big Barnett Newmans in it--that's it.

MS. AVERY: Is that right?

MR. WOLF: Yes. Open to the public.

MS. AVERY: Do they have a guard there?

MR. WOLF: Yes. They have somebody sitting there and that's it. If you know about it, you go in. Otherwise, it's empty.

MS. AVERY: Well, I know the DeMeniles have a little Rothko chapel.

MR. WOLF: Right, they did the Rothko chapel.

MS. AVERY: I didn't know they had a ...?

MR. WOLF: They have lots of stuff. Mostly they like the minimal artists, you know. So Newman kind of precedes them. So Rothko was not that interested in Mondrian?

MS. AVERY: No.

MR. WOLF: So, of the European immigrants, was anybody active with the Americans?

MS. AVERY: What do you mean?

MR. WOLF: Like Mondrian's generation, like Breton and people like that, Max Ernst...?

MS. AVERY: Well, I think Rothko met Breton and, you know, Motherwell and Rothko were friendly with Breton. He was very much a part of the New York scene in the '40s, even earlier than that. It was sort of good for the Americans.

MR. WOLF: I think it was very good.

MS. AVERY: Yes.

MR. WOLF: How about Max Ernst?

MS. AVERY: They all knew Max Ernst. Everybody knew Max Ernst and they knew Jimmy, his son. And he was very...I remember once they gave a surrealist party. It was given by Sidney Janis in this...I'm trying to remember where it was given, someplace up on Madison Avenue. Have you heard about that?

MR. WOLF: No.

MS. AVERY: They had string from the ceiling to the floor, dividing spaces. That was very revolutionary in those days.

MR. WOLF: Duchamp did an installation with string on the ceiling.

MS. AVERY: Yes. This was something like that. And they showed Ernst and Duchamp and mostly all French. And they had a bar, an open bar. The reason I knew about it is because they wanted...my little daughter was about six years old then, and they wanted to accentuate the surrealist quality. They wanted to have a couple of children wandering around in this very sophisticated avant-garde atmosphere. I said okay so I lent them my daughter and there was this other little child. These two kids had a ball. They were playing...they gave them balls, bouncing balls, and they could have all the Coca-Cola they wanted. They loved it. So that added a surrealist touch to the whole exhibition.

MR. WOLF: So Rothko and Gottlieb and people like that were there?

MS. AVERY: They were mostly European artists. I can't remember. They must have been there.

MR. WOLF: When was this that your daughter was six, the late '30s?

MS. AVERY: It was about the early '40s when Breton and Max Ernst were here. It was sort of a celebration of the surrealist element in New York.

MR. WOLF: So Yves Tanguy was probably there.

MS. AVERY: Probably.

MR. WOLF: Probably David Hare.

MS. AVERY: Yes, I'm sure of it.

MR. WOLF: Did David Hare have any connection with Rothko?

MS. AVERY: Well, they both showed at the Kootz Gallery so they knew each other. I saw him just the other day. Where did I see him? Oh, I know where it was. It was at the opening of works on paper at Marissa Del Re.

MR. WOLF: Oh, yes. That's a good gallery.

MS. AVERY: Yes, and she had one of David Hare's.

MR. WOLF: Well, he's still working away, David Hare.

MS. AVERY: Yes. You don't hear much about him but....

MR. WOLF: He shows at Hamilton Gallery now. Actually you mentioned Duchamp and I noticed that in 1955 Milton Avery was at the McDowell Colony with Duchamp.

MS. AVERY: Yes, and Duchamp was there.

MR. WOLF: Were you there also?

MS. AVERY: Sure. That's when.... I told you that story how Milton used to play pool every night. He was very good. Duchamp had never played so Milton was giving him lessons; I mean was trying to teach him. Duchamp.

one day, said, "Milton, I am going to have cards printed. 'Marcel Duchamp, pupil of Milton Avery.'" He thought that was the greatest joke.

MR. WOLF: So he was really making jokes a lot, Duchamp?

MS. AVERY: Yes. He liked to make jokes. He came up, he was invited up to the Colony. They had a thing called artists in residence. They'd invite one artist to come up each summer and stay at the McDowell residence. Mrs. McDowell had died, so they were using that residence. They would invite an artist up and the artist could do anything. If he wanted to work, he could work. If he didn't, he didn't have to. So they invited Duchamp up. Of course, he never worked for the last 30 years but he was getting bored there. So they advertised in the newspaper for someone to come and play chess with him because he liked to play chess. They put an ad in the local newspaper.

MR. WOLF: Is this Yaddo or McDowell?

MS. AVERY: McDowell. I don't think he ever went to Yaddo.

MR. WOLF: Because in this chronology here it says Yadoo, Yaddo-Duchamp.

MS. AVERY: No, it was at McDowell. Then the chronology is wrong.

MR. WOLF: Yes, I guess so.

MS. AVERY: I didn't notice it.

MR. WOLF: So in those years Duchamp was pretending he wasn't working but actually he was, secretly.

MS. AVERY: He was a secret worker? I didn't know that.

MR. WOLF: Oh, yes. There's a big environmental piece of his now that he gave to the Philadelphia Museum that they installed after he died.

MS. AVERY: You mean the cracked glass one?

MR. WOLF: No. This is a whole room, and you look in through a little peep hole and there's a sculpture of a nude woman lying on a landscape. You can only see part of it because there's just this little hole to look through. But that was his big secret piece that no one knew about.

MS. AVERY: That he was working on that no one knew about?

MR. WOLF: Yes. And he gave it I guess because of the Arensberg Collection. They have so much of his.

MS. AVERY: They have a lot of good things of his there.

MR. WOLF: So what was he like, Duchamp?

MS. AVERY: He was nice. He was always cracking jokes and very dapper. He was very approachable.

MR. WOLF: How did he support himself? That's something I've never been clear on.

MS. AVERY: He was married to Matisse's ex-wife, former wife.

MR. WOLF: He was?

MS. AVERY: Yes. He never seemed to have money problems.

MR. WOLF: Was that Teeny Duchamp? Is that her name?

MS. AVERY: I think that was her name.

MR. WOLF: Oh, I didn't realize she was married to Matisse.

MS. AVERY: She was the wife of Matisse.

MR. WOLF: So that's a little Matisse connection.

MS. AVERY: Yes. It was Pierre Matisse, the dealer, not.... She would have been too old, even for Duchamp. Pierre Matisse. He married Matisse's wife and I think Matisse married Matta's wife.

MR. WOLF: And Matta had an affair with Gorky's wife.

[LAUGHTER]

MR. WOLF: Well, that's nothing new. So did Rothko know Duchamp?

MS. AVERY: I really don't know whether he knew him because he didn't come up to McDowell's. He wasn't there.

MR. WOLF: I guess Motherwell knew Duchamp.

MS. AVERY: Motherwell probably knew him because he was very friendly with Breton. But I don't know if Rothko knew him. He may have, because he was around New York. You know, he came to New York a lot. I mean he'd come back and forth.

MR. WOLF: Who?

MS. AVERY: Duchamp.

MR. WOLF: Oh, I thought he lived in New York.

MS. AVERY: He did, but...

MR. WOLF: Oh, from McDowell?

MS. AVERY: No. I mean when he came from France. First he used to come to New York and then go back. Then he stayed in New York, I guess after he married Pierre Matisse's wife.

MR. WOLF: So then there are all these Surrealists around who are important to these American abstract expressionists. But it didn't seem like they had much effect on Milton Avery.

MS. AVERY: No, they didn't.

MR. WOLF: In fact, one of the things that struck me was that portrait of Marsden Hartley that he did.

MS. AVERY: Yes.

MR. WOLF: To me that's one of the few things I've seen by Milton Avery that really had some sense of anxiety. I mean Marsden Hartley just doesn't look so relaxed or anything.

MS. AVERY: Because that's the way Marsden was.

MR. WOLF: I guess so.

MS. AVERY: That is such a psychological portrait.

MR. WOLF: I think so too.

MS. AVERY: He was a very tortured...I mean you looked at him, you saw a very tortured soul, I mean in his eyes, everything about him, greenish pallor. It's all there in the portrait.

MR. WOLF: He was a friend of yours?

MS. AVERY: Yes. He was a good friend of ours. He would come and have dinner at our house.

MR. WOLF: He must have been quite a guy too.

MS. AVERY: He was very interesting, but he was very bitter. He said he was bitter because he felt he had never been properly given his due. He said he never had gotten the respect of the ordinary man. He said if he had been a doctor or a lawyer he would have. And he said if he had his life to live over again, he would never be an artist. He said when he went to that little town in Maine, when he used to go back there, that little town in Maine where he was born, he said no one would even ask him to come in and have a cup of tea. He said it was just really....

MR. WOLF: Why did he go there? Why did he go to that little town in Maine?

MS. AVERY: Because he liked to sketch there. That's where Mount Manadnock was, and that's where he was born and he liked it there.

MR. WOLF: But he was kind of an outcast.

MS. AVERY: Yes. He was considered a little bit above a vagrant. Actually, it wasn't until the last couple years of his life that he ever had any real success. That was after he went to the Rosenberg Gallery. And he really didn't live long enough to enjoy it.

MR. WOLF: On the other hand, from what I've read about him, it sounds like he never had a job in his life.

MS. AVERY: Well, that's true. He didn't do that because Stieglitz got someone to support him, but it was on a very marginal scale. He lived in an eight-dollar-a-week furnished room. He could just about get along. So whoever was giving him money didn't give him a lot of money and he produced a lot of work.

MR. WOLF: But it seems like the artists respected him, the art world.

MS. AVERY: That's right. They did. But I remember him once telling us--this was before he went with Rosenberg--he said, "I'm going to leave directions that when I die I want everything of mine to be burned up. I don't want some of these dealers making money on me when they never made money for me when I was alive."

MR. WOLF: Well, he failed in that ambition.

MS. AVERY: Thank goodness.

MR. WOLF: It's nice to have the work around. But to me Hartley is like a whole different generation and a whole different phase of American art.

MS. AVERY: He was.

MR. WOLF: And Milton Avery in a way seems to be like in the middle then. It seems like he had contact with the earlier Americans...you knew Max Weber also, right?

MS. AVERY: Yes. We didn't know Max Weber well, but he was in the same gallery. He was in the Rosenberg Gallery. And he was a very dramatic, egotistical guy, very. And Milton was just like...he was on the lowest rung and Weber was the top man. But that picture's changed radically.

MR. WOLF: Yes. Also, I read in that chronology that an early show, juried by Max Weber, included Avery in 1927.

MS. AVERY: That's right. And that's when Max Weber picked him out and said, "This is a man to watch. I think he'll go somewhere."

MR. WOLF: Good. So what other of the earlier generation of Americans did you know? Like Dove or Marin or Georgia O'Keeffe?

MS. AVERY: We didn't know Dove at all because he didn't live in New York. He lived someplace else. And we only met Marin once fairly late, you know, just for a moment at the restaurant. But we never really knew him. Hartley we knew very well. He liked Milton and they were in the same gallery and he would come to see us all the time. Max Weber we knew but we didn't see him socially.

MR. WOLF: How about Andrew Dasberg or Konrad Cramer, people like that?

MS. AVERY: We didn't know them at all. We knew Arnold Blanch very well. Do you know him?

MR. WOLF: I know His work, yes.

MS. AVERY: He was a very good friend of ours, and Boris Margo. But he wasn't in that generation. We knew Kuniyoshi but not well, just casual.

MR. WOLF: It just seems like in a way....

MS. AVERY: Milton was really...his idea of painting was way beyond. It's in a different school than all these other guys. He really was very avant-garde but people didn't notice it so much because he still used natural objects. But his painting from an aesthetic point of view is very advanced. Painters recognized it immediately and they were very intrigued with it, but it took the general public, even the museum public, a long time to understand what he was doing.

MR. WOLF: But that seems to be, if you're original, that's part of the deal.

MS. AVERY: That's true.

MR. WOLF: But what artists did he especially admire, Milton Avery?

MS. AVERY: Well, he didn't admire too many.

MR. WOLF: Oh yes?

MS. AVERY: He liked Modigliani, I know that. He loved Bonnard. He liked Giacometti. He liked the poetic painters.

MR. WOLF: How about Matisse?

MS. AVERY: He liked Matisse. But I'm all too aware that people are saying Avery's like Matisse when actually his whole philosophic concept was very different.

MR. WOLF: How is that?

MS. AVERY: Well, Matisse is a hedonist and Milton was an aesthetic. Also, Milton had the tremendous sense of order in his paintings. He never leaves anything flying off on a tangent or he never does anything for effect. I mean the whole canvas was always an integrated whole. And Matisse will do things to make it...it has a much jazzier quality. There's nothing jazzy about Milton's work. They both had a remarkable sense of color. That is their biggest tie, but philosophically they differ widely in what they're trying to say. And I think Milton's is a much deeper philosophic message.

MR. WOLF: That asceticism could almost be part of that American grain.

MS. AVERY: It is. It's that ethical quality that's so typical, especially in northeastern America that Milton had very strongly.

MR. WOLF: That strikes me about Hopper. You'll notice that he's so severe in the light. But the color in Milton's paintings is anything but aesthetic.

MS. AVERY: That's true.

MR. WOLF: So that's the other side of it. I was reading that book where they make him out to be part of a pastoral tradition.

MS. AVERY: What did you think of that?

MR. WOLF: They made some interesting points. I just skimmed it. I mean it certainly gets to some parts of his work. And it was interesting to me that she connects him with Claude and Corot. I don't know.

MS. AVERY: I think that essay is purely an intellectual exercise and had very little to do with Milton.

MR. WOLF: It did seem a little bit thin. I wanted to get some facts and some meaty things to talk about here; I didn't get too much out of that although I did get some things. One thing that interested me just from looking at a lot of the work, it seems like the ocean and the coast is a constant concern of his.

MS. AVERY: Yes, we spent so many years, so many summers. We spent three or four summers in Gloucester. And then we spent a couple summers out on the coast in California. And then we spent three or four summers in Provincetown.

MR. WOLF: Where in California?

MS. AVERY: Laguna Beach.

MR. WOLF: Oh, I didn't know that. I had a whole list; I wrote down this thing about all the places you spent your summers and they didn't mention California. Gloucester, Connecticut, Vermont....

MS. AVERY: In 1941....

MR. WOLF: Oh, across the united States.

MS. AVERY: We went across the United States two or three times. We went to.... I think that was in 1941 when we went to California.

MR. WOLF: Laguna Beach is kind of like Newport.

MS. AVERY: Oh, really. When we were there in 1941, it was a very little town. It's grown considerably.

MR. WOLF: When did you go to Mexico?

MS. AVERY: In '46.

MR. WOLF: It seems like a lot of American artists would go to Mexico.

MS. AVERY: Well, there was...actually when we went to Mexico, we spent about six weeks at San Miguel Allende. They had a big art school that was run by an American from Chicago, a fellow named Dickinson.

MR. WOLF: Not Edmund Dickinson?

MS. AVERY: No. I don't know what his first name was. But he ran the school in an old hacienda and a lot of Americans came down there, and there were some Americans living there too. I think now there are a lot of Americans.

MR. WOLF: Any known artists?

MS. AVERY: That were down there when we were there?

MR. WOLF: Yes.

MS. AVERY: No, we were the only ones. But that's where we first met Warren Brandt. Was there on his first honeymoon.

MR. WOLF: With that beach subject matter, it just seems that....

MS. AVERY: Oh, and we were down in Florida for a couple of winters when Milton was sick. We were about an hour's drive from Cocoa Beach and we used to go over to Cocoa Beach all the time, so that was more beach stuff.

MR. WOLF: Was that because you liked the beach?

MS. AVERY: Yes, we loved the beach.

MR. WOLF: So do I.

MS. AVERY: I love the sea. Actually, I'd probably have a place in East Hampton if it wasn't for traveling out there which is so hideous. I can't stand it.

MR. WOLF: Yes, that's true. It's still beautiful out there. But I don't know. I'm more from the beach than the mountain persuasion myself. Those wave paintings struck me because....

MS. AVERY: They're fabulous.

MR. WOLF: To me it's a big tradition. Yes, they're beautiful and they're like modern versions of a tradition to me that goes back to Turner and Corbet and then to Winslow Homer. And did he think in those terms?

MS. AVERY: No. I think actually the beach things are very different than, say, Winslow Homer's. No, I think he really tried to work out of his...naturally he was familiar with all those things, but I think he tried to translate the way he felt about the sea into an aesthetic equivalent. And he was always fooling around, trying different things.

MR. WOLF: But one thing she said in that essay is there's not a lot of machines in his paintings.

MS. AVERY: That's true. He very seldom...though he did a couple of bridge paintings and a few cityscapes with big buildings, but it wasn't really what attracted him.

MR. WOLF: He's more of a landscape persuasion.

MS. AVERY: He's very much into the landscape and the seascape and to interiors or figures. Just think...I love what Rothko said--out of these homely subjects great poems are made. And that's the way it was. It wasn't the subject that was great; it was Milton that was great. And he took these ordinary subjects and infused them with a great deal of poetry.

MR. WOLF: That's definitely true. He was also involved with the WPA for a while?

MS. AVERY: Very little. He was only on it for about six months because they wanted him to sign a pauper's oath and he said, "I'll never do that."

MR. WOLF: A what?

MS. AVERY: They wanted you to sign like a pauper's oath saying that you don't have any money in the bank, not that we had any money in the bank. But he wouldn't do that.

MR. WOLF: Why not?

MS. AVERY: Because he....

MR. WOLF: It offended his pride.

MS. AVERY: They could never admit that anything was wrong or bad or it just would hurt his pride.

MR. WOLF: I see. So how was the experience of the WPA?

MS. AVERY: It wasn't so great anyway. He got $38 a week, which wasn't great. And the first couple of paintings he took down, they didn't like. So he had to take them back.

MR. WOLF: Who's "they?"

MS. AVERY: They had a committee, you know, which passed on the paintings you brought in. So he went back and he got a couple of others and then they passed on those. He gave them about probably half a dozen paintings which, if they'd kept them, would more than pay back their $38 a week.

MR. WOLF: Yes, but they didn't keep them anyhow, right?

MS. AVERY: Remember when they were selling a lot of paintings that they had taken off the stretchers and they sold them by the pound for junk? And somebody I know bought a couple of them. Eventually they came up at Parke Bernet and sold for thousands of dollars but we didn't get them.

MR. WOLF: Was Rothko on the WPA at that time as well?

MS. AVERY: Yes. I think he was, yes. He was on it for a number of years.

MR. WOLF: A lot of artists were.

MS. AVERY: Gottlieb was on it. I don't know if Newman was on it. I don't think he was painting. He hadn't decided he was a painter yet.

MR. WOLF: I don't think so.

MS. AVERY: I think he decided he was a painter when he saw you could hang up a canvas with one stripe and be considered a genius. So he said, "I can do that, too." and he did that.

MR. WOLF: But that WPA, the thing was it gave the artists time to work.

MS. AVERY: It was a great thing.

MR. WOLF: You were his WPA?

MS. AVERY: I was it. I think the WPA was terrific. It gave like a breathing space for all those artists who could have a chance to work, and a lot of good things came out of it. Those guides to different parts of the country--they were fantastic.

MR. WOLF: A lot of that stuff has been lost now but they're working on trying to get it back again.

MS. AVERY: Oh, they are?

MR. WOLF: A lot of the murals and things have been painted over.

MS. AVERY: I've heard tales that most of the paintings were pretty crappy, really weren't worth saving. But that's true always, you know. You need a thousand bad paintings to make one good one. You really do.

MR. WOLF: So was Avery interested in Morandi at all?

MS. AVERY: He liked Morandi. Yes, he did.

MR. WOLF: I could see a connection.

MS. AVERY: There weren't many Morandi shows around but you'd see one once in a while and he always reacted and thought he was a terrific painter.

MR. WOLF: Also, I was looking at some of his...kind of the way he simplifies the birds and he simplifies the cows. That almost reminded me of primitive art like Paleolithic wall paintings.

MS. AVERY: That's true. I remember when we were in the Lascaux caves and we saw these things and elk on the wall, and they really looked like the kind of drawing Milton does.

MR. WOLF: Yes. On Australian bark painting? When were you there?

MS. AVERY: In 1952.

MR. WOLF: That must have been great. I don't even think you can get into them any more.

MS. AVERY: No. We were some of the last people that were allowed in. After that they decided that they were deteriorating too fast from all the traffic and with people breathing spoiled the color.

MR. WOLF: Carbon dioxide. That's too bad in a way. I always thought I would see those eventually.

MS. AVERY: It was a fabulous experience.

MR. WOLF: So what was Milton Avery's life like in his early years before he met you in 1925?

MS. AVERY: I don't know. I mean I think he painted all day. Then he used to work at night time in this insurance company from 6:00 to 12:00, came home and slept for a few hours and then got up and painted. It was a very.... Then there was a little class there, I guess, a life class that he used to go to.

MR. WOLF: Do you think there's a time when his painting attained maturity, or do you think it was like a real gradual evolution?

MS. AVERY: I think it was a gradual evolution.

MR. WOLF: That's what it seems like.

MS. AVERY: I think he was growing when he was still doing...it was like a person growing. He never locked himself into any particular phase of his work. He was always evolving, continuing.

MR. WOLF: Getting more and more resolved.

MS. AVERY: But I think there is a difference after his first heart attack in 1949. His painting became...there was a change. It became...up till then...his things began to get from very dark--they had gotten to be very high key. I think they began to have a different quality. They became more universal and less topical, less related to.... Though he used a subject, that subject was not what he was thinking about. If it was a figure, it was not a particular figure but it was every figure.

MR. WOLF: Yes. He got to an extreme kind of simplification.

MS. AVERY: Yes.

MR. WOLF: Those late beach scenes too remind me of Rothko's late paintings, even in colors. Some of them are tan and black.

MS. AVERY: That's true.

MR. WOLF: So you think there's a connection there somehow? They were working in a similar direction?

MS. AVERY: They might have had similar thoughts. I don't know.

MR. WOLF: Would they still look at each other's work?

MS. AVERY: At that time they were not seeing much of each other at all. So I can't say. Rothko had gone off on his tangent and he wasn't hanging around with us. So I can't say that one was related to the other.

MR. WOLF: How did Milton Avery go about making a painting?

MS. AVERY: He got up in the morning and went to his easel.

MR. WOLF: And set up a model?

MS. AVERY: No. He usually had sketch books. He'd look over his sketch book or maybe look over some water colors and decide what he was going to do that day. Then he put up a canvas and drew the sketch he had decided on and draw it out in charcoal on the canvas.

MR. WOLF: Which was already guessed?

MS. AVERY: Yes, it was prepared. On a prepared canvas--let's put it that way. Then he would start painting. Sometimes the sketch he was working from would be in black and white; sometimes it would be in color. If it was in color, he sometimes would follow the colors rather closely and sometimes he wouldn't. It depended on how he felt. But usually he always simplified more in the painting than he did in the sketch. That was one thing that was pretty constant.

MR. WOLF: And painted with thinned-out oils?

MS. AVERY: Yes. He didn't like heavy paint at all. And he could make a tube of paint last for a long, long time. He didn't like shiny paint. He didn't like heavy paint.

MR. WOLF: How about overpainting?

MS. AVERY: Well, he sometimes overpainted an area but it wasn't...usually he had an idea of what he was going to do so clearly defined in his mind that he said all the work was done before he put a brush to the canvas. That was the easiest part.

MR. WOLF: Well, they do have that look of a kind of freshness.

MS. AVERY: I mean his theory was that if a canvas looked worked over or looked...it was no longer a work of art. It had to look as if it just happened, like a miracle.

MR. WOLF: Yes, I can see that. So did he end up throwing out a lot?

MS. AVERY: He destroyed a lot, yes.

MR. WOLF: Because that's kind of a risky way to work if you don't want to overpaint much. And then in the first place the drawings were from life or from the landscape?

MS. AVERY: Yes. Actually, the original drawings were from either a landscape, a seascape, an object. They usually were something that he had experienced and it was a firsthand experience. I mean he didn't try to copy, or meticulously render what he was doing. He was trying to say something entirely different.

MR. WOLF: Well, he gave it a kind of essence, too, I think.

MS. AVERY: Yes, I remember a George Dietrie who was Matisse's son-in-law who bought a painting from us once. He loved Milton's work. He thought it was fantastic. He said he had done something that not even the French painters had done. He had married abstraction to an instant in nature. I thought that was a remark....

MR. WOLF: Yes, that's a good way to put it. But he did relatively few portraits?

MS. AVERY: Oh, no. He did hundreds of portraits.

MR. WOLF: He did?

MS. AVERY: As a matter of fact, when we were first married, everybody who came to see us he would make a drawing of. At that time he sometimes worked directly from the model. He did hundreds of small heads.

MR. WOLF: Like of whom?

MS. AVERY: He did me, of course, a hundred times. He did Esther Gottlieb. He did everybody who came around.

MR. WOLF: Where are those now?

MS. AVERY: I have them.

MR. WOLF: Oh, yes?

MS. AVERY: Uh-huh.

MR. WOLF: How many do you think there are?

MS. AVERY: At least 50.

MR. WOLF: That would be an interesting show.

MS. AVERY: The portraits I would like to see in a show...he did about 50 or so portraits of himself. Whenever he didn't know what to paint, he'd say, "I don't know what to paint today. I think I'll do a self-portrait." So he did all these self-portraits and they're very witty and very.... He was without ego. He could look at himself like an object, so he could do all sorts of things with himself.

MR. WOLF: So there's one in the Gloucester show, right? That's a self-portrait. It's kind of looking out with a lot of darkness in the canvas. At least I thought it was.

MS. AVERY: No, I don't think there's one of him in there.

MR. WOLF: Oh, yes. That's someone on the beach.

MS. AVERY: That big long thing?

MR. WOLF: Vertical.

MS. AVERY: That's Gerrit Hondius, that painting. It's vertical.

MR. WOLF: So how many self-portraits do you think he did?

MS. AVERY: At least 50.

MR. WOLF: That's very interesting because usually artists who do a lot of self-portraits like that are loaded with ego.

MS. AVERY: That's it. But he had no ego and he just used himself in a fabulous...there's a little one hanging there. Look at it.

MR. WOLF: But the one thing I was interested in, you were saying that a lot of these works are witty, and I think they are and I've read that they are. Was that an intention of his?

MS. AVERY: Well, he was a very witty person. I don't think that he could help it. It was just a natural extension of himself. He didn't go out and say, "I'm going to do something witty." It just came naturally.

MR. WOLF: It was just natural, like that self-portrait of him. the Signs of the Galleries. It was so comic, and very unpretentious.

MS. AVERY: Yes, that's him. He was very unpretentious. He never did anything really to show how smart he was.

MR. WOLF: So he wasn't so verbally witty? He was just witty in his art?

MS. AVERY: No. Well, once in a while he would say something that would get through. I told you...did I tell you this story about when he was first beginning to attract a lot of attention?

MR. WOLF: No.

MS. AVERY: We went to a party and a friend said to him, "Milton, how are you going to take all this attention?" So Milton looked at him and said, "Well, I think I can handle it but I don't know if my friends can." He could be pretty witty.

MR. WOLF: It seems like his friends could handle it too. You lived on Broadway in 1926?

MS. AVERY: That's right.

MR. WOLF: So it seems you were moving all over Manhattan for those years.

MS. AVERY: In the beginning we moved a lot. It was very easy to move in those days.

MR. WOLF: It wasn't like there was an artists' neighborhood.

MS. AVERY: No. Well, first we lived there. Then we lived on 72nd Street. Then we lived on 78th Street. And we lived on East 65th Street. And then we moved down to the Village and we stayed there in the Village because

maybe that was the most sympathetic place to live.

MR. WOLF: How long were you there?

MS. AVERY: We moved down there in...we must have been there about 20 years.

MR. WOLF: Where in the Village?

MS. AVERY: On 11th Street.

MR. WOLF: And?

MS. AVERY: Near Bleecker Street, 294 West 11th Street.

MR. WOLF: That's nice. That's a nice neighborhood still.

MS. AVERY: It is nice. The West Village is really nice. My daughter has a house now on Bank Street in the West Village. It's really attractive.

MR. WOLF: I live in Chelsea which is just a little north...that's nice there too. I like it.

MS. AVERY: Yes. That's getting so much better.

MR. WOLF: I know.

MS. AVERY: I have a friend who has a house on 21st Street which she's trying to sell now, if you know anybody who wants to buy a beautiful house with a studio?

MR. WOLF: On 21st and what?

MS. AVERY: Between Ninth and Tenth.

MR. WOLF: For how much? Do you know?

MS. AVERY: No, I really don't know. It's a four story house and they have two apartments, two duplexes--one she rents and one she lives in.

MR. WOLF: That sounds great.

MS. AVERY: It's a very nice house. She wants to move to Santa Fe.

MR. WOLF: That's her mistake, I think.

MS. AVERY: Have you been down there?

MR. WOLF: No, I just know people who have. Well, I guess if you want to be relaxed and enjoy the landscape it's nice. But I don't think there's too much going on there.

MS. AVERY: Well, they have the opera now.

MR. WOLF: Yes, I guess so. And they've got some art too. I mean I've never been there so I can't say, but I like New York.

MS. AVERY: I do too.

MR. WOLF: Did you live here with Milton Avery?

MS. AVERY: Yes. He lived here for about five years.

MR. WOLF: So this is where he did his last works?

MS. AVERY: Yes.

MR. WOLF: Did he have a studio somewhere else?

MS. AVERY: No, he never did. He always worked at home, never had a studio in all the years. I see all these young artists with all these marvelous studios, and Milton never really had an adequate studio.

MR. WOLF: He never had an adequate studio?

MS. AVERY: Never. Well, when we went away for the summer, he'd work in the barn or some little shack. And when we were on 11th Street, he just used one of the rooms. We had a floor through in a brownstone.

MR. WOLF: But in the later years he started painting larger.

MS. AVERY: He managed. It wasn't easy.

MR. WOLF: Did it bother him?

MS. AVERY: No.

MR. WOLF: He was comfortable like that?

MS. AVERY: It didn't bother him. If he had had a better studio, he would have liked it but he didn't have it so he never made a fuss about it. "I can't paint. This studio isn't good enough for me or big enough."

MR. WOLF: So who were the artists...go ahead.

MS. AVERY: He started doing...when we went to Provincetown, there was an art store there, right next door to where we were living. That's when he got the idea of doing some big things because they stretched the canvases for him.

MR. WOLF: I see.

MS. AVERY: And then we pulled them up on a rope. We were on the third floor.

MR. WOLF: In through the window you mean?

MS. AVERY: In through the window. That's when he first began doing those big seascapes.

MR. WOLF: But you said when I last spoke to you that younger artists who were painting large might have encouraged him in that direction--like Rothko.

MS. AVERY: He might have gotten it because he never actually had thought about doing big canvases but everybody else was doing something. I certainly encouraged him--if everybody else is doing it, why don't you do it too?

MR. WOLF: It looks good with color. Did he show with those younger artists?

MS. AVERY: Yes. The first time he showed those big canvases was up in Provincetown at the HCE Gallery where they were showing Rothko and Motherwell all the New York painters.

MR. WOLF: Did he show with Hartley?

MS. AVERY: He showed with Hartley at the Rosenberg Gallery.

MR. WOLF: Right. So he's really like the basic...it seems to me that it's like basic to the continuity of American art, from the early modernists....

MS. AVERY: The interesting thing is that from the most academic to the most advanced abstractionist, they all liked his work. He was very popular with artists across the board.

MR. WOLF: He's a painter's painter.

MS. AVERY: He really is a painter's painter.

MR. WOLF: I think that might do it. Can you think of anything I left out?

MS. AVERY: How can you tell?

MR. WOLF: I don't know. How about of his contemporaries, was he especially impressed with any of the artists around him in New York?

MS. AVERY: I don't think he was particularly interested. He was just involved in his own thing, you know.

MR. WOLF: Yes, he knew what he was doing.

MS. AVERY: He knew what he was doing, and he really wanted to do what he wanted to do.

MR. WOLF: Before you were saying how philosophically he's different from Matisse.

MS. AVERY: Yes, I think so.

MR. WOLF: How he's more aesthetic. But when I think of Matisse...well, I think of that famous quote of Matisse where he says he wants his art to be like an easy chair for the working man. Do you think that could apply to Milton Avery as well? I mean there is something calm and relaxed.

MS. AVERY: I think there's something very orderly. Someone said once that they could hang Avery paintings in insane asylums and they would calm all the patients. There's a tremendous sense of order in his work and they had a very soothing effect.

MR. WOLF: And affirming too. So, who was his ideal audience for his work, do you think, or did he think of it like that?

MS. AVERY: Well, he once said if he thought of the audience, he probably would stop painting because usually the kind of people that buy your pictures are not the kind of people that you're particularly enchanted with. Let's face it. So he preferred not to think about the audience. He just liked to paint. As he said, he didn't know how to do anything else but paint. That was the only thing he was really totally interested in.

MR. WOLF: So could you say he was painting for himself?

MS. AVERY: I think he was painting to express himself. He wasn't painting for himself, but he was expressing how he felt and translating it into a plastic term. He was very happy if people liked his work, but it really didn't make that much difference to him. If he really liked it, that was the main thing. He had to like it first. If he was happy and satisfied with it, then if someone else liked it, it was good too. The main thing was that he had to feel good about it himself.

MR. WOLF: I think that's a good place to end.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Last updated...August 9, 2006