



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Neil Welliver,
1996 November 14

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.

Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Neil Gavin Welliver on November 15, 1996. The interview took place in Lincolnville, ME, and was conducted by Robert F. Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

This is tape one of two side A.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Inaudible.] We're starting the interview at Neil Welliver's house near Lincolnville, Maine. This is November 14, '96. Robert Brown, the interviewer. Uh, talk a bit about just, your beginnings and earlier memories, what was your family—what—where were you?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Family was split. I was reared by my maternal grandparents, and—[inaudible]—uh, in the court they were made my charge—I was made their charge.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You were a ward of the court.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: And so it was in effect in those days like adoption. So, my grandparents reared me. My mother remarried uh, a minister, God help us all, and I was adopted again. And—

ROBERT F. BROWN: By him.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: —yep, yep, by him. By my—

ROBERT F. BROWN: This is where? In, uh—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Pennsylvania.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —where, in a small place?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Uh, Bloomsburg Court is where it happened. And was all done, and his name was Ealy [ph], and the judge said, "Now, do you want to change your name to Ealy?" I said "No, I don't." Dug in my heels. And he said "Why?" And I said, "Can you imagine being called 'Neil Ealy?'" [They laugh.] And the judge laughed.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now, how old were you at this—?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: I can't tell you.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Not very old.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: No. Old enough to know that I didn't want to do that. And so, it was a poor, very, very fucking poor and painful childhood by anyone's standard.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was schooling anything—[inaudible]—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: I didn't do a fucking thing in school. Nothing. But when I was 14, I had read the whole high school library encyclopedia secretly. My mother let me build a little apparatus for under the covers, and I would run a cord down. Had a light bulb in there, I would read until four in the morning. Encyclopedias, dictionaries, all the classics, everything else. [00:02:00] So I was a complete autodidact, I didn't do a goddamn thing in school. I knew I had to get a D to pass, and that's what I did.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Was your mother encouraging in this sort of thing? It sounds like it [ph].

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: She was—just threw up her hands, right?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Because I was extremely independent, totally. And uh, wasn't much she could do about it. That very night [ph]—they hated me in the school, of course. I remember we were doing symbols and valances in 11th grade—and I'm reading, they're doing it—and the guy comes over and said, "You're reading

Herodotus." I said, "That's right have you ever read it?" He said, "No." I said, "It's travels in Egypt. Have you ever read that?" He says, "No." I said, "It's a great book. I'd go right back and do it." And the last year in school a new principal came and—who had a son who was mute. And so, he had a very curious way of speaking, he would nod his head and talk to you. And he went to my mother and said, "Your son's very intelligent." And, to which I'm sure she said, "What?" He said, "I'd like to test him." So I went, I remember the test like yesterday. I went to his office, five days, 8:30 in the morning, 4:30 in the afternoon, no multiple choice, no true and false. And we started in Mesopotamia and went to Egypt, and to Rome, and to Greece, and to Rome, and to medieval Europe, and to medieval England, and here. And it was an essay, and I just wrote, and wrote, and wrote, and wrote, and wrote, like a Sears Roebuck catalogue, *bump, bump, bump, bump, bump*. And I tested off the chart, up by the ceiling, because the whole thing was, how much do you know, and how much do you retain? I retain everything. Then I could have gone anywhere to college. Anywhere. And an uncle of mine who ostensibly had money, who was a bullshit artist, [00:04:00] came and we met in the parlor, and he said, "I heard about your tests," and I'm thinking not from me buddy, 'cause I didn't tell anyone. He said, "I'll make you a proposition." He said, "If you'll go to an Ivy League school and do pre-med, go to an Ivy League medical school, I'll pay for it." I said, "I want to be an artist, like a cartoon balloon out in front of me." It was the first time I'd said it to myself or to anyone else.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Inaudible]—but you did want to be an artist, by then?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: [Inaudible]—absolute internal gut, but not conscious, right? And then I went off to art school.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Had you done much uh, drawing?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: All the time—continuous.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Always?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Endless. All the time, all the time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Imagination?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Mm-hmm [affirmative], yeah. And observation, both. And then when I went to art school I never paid a cent of tuition in my life, because it was all, you know, they'd see the tests, fellowship, scholarship, whatever you wanted to do.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you went where to art school?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: I went to the, it was then called the Philadelphia Museum College. And I went there, and I did a BFA in, I think Educational Psychology, it was. Because that was the way you got the most time to paint. Otherwise you were doing fucking design things, or, you know. And then I left there, and I taught public school for one year—slightly less than a year. And the loyalty oath came along, and I would not sign it. Not on political grounds, but I just didn't want to do it. Went home for the weekend, I said I want to take this home with me, and I showed it to my ancient grandfather, then, then 91 or [9]2. Said read this, got his big specs on, read it. He said, "What is this?" I said, "In order to continue teaching I have to sign this." He said, "Don't sign it." I said "Why?" He said, "It's Un-American."

ROBERT F. BROWN: This was in the '50s, at the height of this [ph]?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: They, they canned me. And I came out of there, and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Inaudible]—mid-'50s or so, some odd.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Yeah. Went to Yale, went to Yale. [00:06:00] Yeah, absolutely mid-'50s. Early-'50s—'53.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Yeah. Did you—all these years [ph], from your childhood did you have friends and people like that that you accumulated, or your independence sort of included staying to yourself?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Yep, yep, yep. Raising hell to dispense with energy.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you have a social life—did you?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Chased the girls, yep, chased the girls. My son came here, my eldest son, now 42, said to me—my mother said, when she met you, you didn't drink. I said, "That's true." He said, "Why not?" I said, "I couldn't afford it. You don't understand that." I said, "I could not afford it. Met your mother, went to her home, they had two martinis every night, I did that, I've done it my whole life, and now I can't do that anymore because it makes me sick."

ROBERT F. BROWN: You got married back in the '50s, you said, the first time?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was she also in the arts, or—?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Fashion illustrator, still is. One of the best in the fucking world.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Who is that?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Her name was Norma Cripps, signed her name as Norm-Norma, and she worked around Philadelphia for the fancy stores. And then in New York, and then she and I split, uh, no problems, just we both realized we were going different places. And so, we made a settlement in Philadelphia, and I flew off to Juarez and got a divorce.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Let me ask about that Philadelphia Museum College of Art which you attended for, what, one—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Now it's called University of the Arts, I think.

ROBERT F. BROWN: University of the Arts.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was that like, how did they teach there and all that?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Uh, it was piss poor. [00:08:00] And uh, except for a couple of people who were very important, because the people who were there, like those we discussed earlier, weren't doing it, they were teachers. And—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Teachers? What, were they—you were supposed to follow them, and learn what they were—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Learn what they had to teach, right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. There were a couple people who—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Casts, drawing casts, with charcoal.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, right. Still doing that?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Oh, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Pretty conservative then.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Very conservative, yeah. And I've never gone back, I mean it's—ended there, it was finished.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: And now that they keep changing it as things are wont to do and it's now called the University of the Arts, but I think is—has hipper people, but is functionally the same.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. But you had a great facility, didn't you, I mean, your drawing and all that? You could just do [ph]—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Yeah. Oh, yeah. I remember going there, and I had academic classes, of course, educational psych, *da, da, da*, curricular planning, that sort of thing—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Because you were aiming—well, you thought you might have to make a living and teach.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Exactly that, exactly that. And uh, in light of the testing, and the reading, and so on, I found that—I thought Jesus Christ, and they're using pen people, it was staffed by pen people, the academic side. This is a goddamn piece of cake, nothing. I mean, I just—[inaudible]—I got the, I got the Ann E. Senate award in education when I graduated. Which surprised me, but it was—there was nothing to it. All right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you took a degree there?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Yeah. Then through a Chinese friend of mine, whose daughter is my goddaughter, he

said, "Why don't you go to Yale?" He said, "Josef Albers is there." And I said, he said, "I have a friend who teaches in architecture." So we go to New Haven, and Albers takes me right away.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Huh. Did you—what was he like when you first met him?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: He—I took a stash of drawings up, and some watercolors, and he went through them in his office. And so, he goes to the door [00:10:00] and he says to his secretary, "I'm going to take this man, not his work, but the man." He's a tough guy, teutonic. And uh, I taught with a guy named Bob Scott who died while I was teaching for him—an assistant, student assistant.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: And it's very funny, Albers came in my studio, and there was a painting—not abstract pictures but quasi-landscapes. He said, "What's that?" Down in the corner a little paint had run, I said, "I'm not—I'm working there." "No, no, no that's not—you're getting on the bandwagon." I said, "What bandwagon?" "The New York bandwagon!" And I said, "No, what I told you is the truth. I'm not finished there, and paint ran. The paint was the wrong consistency." I said [ph], he said, "The paint should be the right consistency." I said, "I know that." So, he said, "The New York thing, that is the worst—" Oh God, he would get really wound up. "Ja, that de Kooning, oh!" I said, "He's a good painter." "What!" "I said he's a good painter." I said, "You had him teaching here two years ago." He said, "He's no good now." I said, "Why?" He said, "He read too many books." He left there, went to Germany for a summer, whatever. And I got a wire from there, and said, "Would you teach for me? And I called him back—phoned him, called him back and I said, "I'd love to teach for you." "Good. You will start in the fall."

ROBERT F. BROWN: You'd not taught before—[inaudible]—at least in art—[inaudible.]

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: I'd taught, but I was a student assistant. I took those classes over, did them my own way and everything else, and I stayed there until he left.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So he left you alone, he liked you as—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: He liked what was happening. And he liked me, that was clear, and that was very hard for him to express, right? He liked me. [00:12:00] And I wrote a big article on him for the *New York Times* called, "Albers on Albers." I don't have it, but you can get it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: We're talking about 1955, and it was a great hit. And then I wrote one on his wife who was a weaver, also New York—no *Crafts Horizons*, I think, in fact. And—

ROBERT F. BROWN: He did not—he never pushed you to be a little Albers at all.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: He came to my studio, see I had a studio here right across the street after I started to teach. Said, "I want to see your paintings." I said, "Come over." I was painting big nudes. And he looked at them, walked around, looked and looked, he said, "Yeah, boy, those bazooms will kill you." [They laugh.] He was very funny. But Anni told me that, she said he came to really admire your work, said he never missed your exhibitions, and I said, "Good." And she said, "He would say to me, 'What did I tell you, you were doubtful, what did I tell you? He's got it.'" But you see that was all second and thirdhand, when he was talking to you he was always critical in some way or another. But I adored him, and I owe every fucking thing that I've ever done to him. The color thing, genius, genius.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And was he very strict and insistent [ph]?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Oh, Jesus Christ, unbelievable. Painted in his house, they had a builders' lot house, downstairs there were neon tubes, blue and orange, and blue and orange and blue and orange. And those squares would lay up there, and he would paint them with a palette knife. Very systematic and very un-arty.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Clinical, right?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Yeah, yeah. But clinical as Germans are wont to be, also. [00:14:00] Also, right, but the mechanics of it was very cut and dry. He was showing with Sidney Janis, and I went to an opening there one time, and then I saw him about a week later and he said, "Yeah, boy," he said, "the green ones." Oh, he said, "They couldn't resist them, I'm going home to make more green paintings." Very, very funny that way.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative]. He kept an eye on his market or potential market.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Absolutely, she did.

ROBERT F. BROWN: She did.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: She did, yeah. She was very, in some ways, sinister, kind of manipulative and sinister, and she ran that part of his life absolutely.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You, when—the first year, early years, you were teaching at Yale, which you began in '55, you also taught a bit at Cooper Union.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Taught at Cooper Union when I was a student. [Cross talk.] Yeah, I'd commute down there. Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you have any impressions of that place, or were you there—?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Yeah, it was a good place, it was a very good place. Oh, yeah. Nick, uh, I want to say Nick Caronni [ph], no the other one, doesn't matter. Yeah, there were good people there. And there was a kind of openness that I'd never seen, so when I left there I brought a shitload of students up to Yale to do their graduate work.

ROBERT F. BROWN: An openness you mean, in the sense of—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: New ideas. No system, but all ideas. Nick Marsicano was the guy, he was the head honcho there then, very nice guy. They were very dubious about me because they saw me as a child of Albers, right, but I got along fine and the classes went well.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was Albers, I mean was Yale less open than Cooper Union? [00:16:00] I mean, Albers did have a very—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: No, no. No, no. All that being said, right, what you're saying is true, he kept it very open.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What he said to you, I like the man, not the work—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Yeah. Yeah. [Inaudible.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: —certainly applied to—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Central to him.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Did he teach—or, did he hover around you when he was teaching, or would you [inaudible]?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: No, no, no, no. You were in a separate cubicle and he'd just drop in and look at what you're doing, and say, "Do you see what you are doing?" And I'd say, "Missed that." "Change it, you should change it, you should consider changing it." Then he would go out. Very, very, perfunctory, very short, but very precise.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Could that then set up a chain of struggle—further struggle in your mind?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Yep, yep.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Which is what education should be.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Yep, yep. No I'm indebted to him so long as I live. Never copied his work, I never did anything—but I learned from him, holy shit.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The color?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Oh, the color thing in particular. Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were there other teachers that you can look back and were important to you?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Well people came, the critics came, Marcarelli, yes, Jim Brooks in a very big way. In a very big way.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Really? How so?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Uh, he was an abstract painter and passionate about it, and he had that marvelous capacity for looking at your picture as if it were abstract, which mine are. And taking you through it. This is repetitive, you know what's happening, you didn't paint the corner up there, you know, you're not using the

corners in your paintings. That seems so simplistic, but that's—you can do that your whole life and never use the corners. Very, very good teacher. Very good.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you were doing figural work at that time, among other things, right? [00:18:00]

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Yeah. And the other great one we had there was Burgoyne Diller, who was absolutely sensational teacher. And I thought a terrific painter, totally enamored of the De Stijl thing, but he added a lot to it and they had one show of his somewhere, I think at MOMA, which I couldn't go to. He died, very big boozier, and he died. And I went there, and fucking place was closed, and I missed that show. But he was a great teacher. Brooks for me was the center of the whole thing, from my point of view. And Marca-Relli, too, was a great help.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What did he bring out, do you think?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Marca-Relli was interested in black and white, you know, which his work was then, and he could sort of take you through the tonality of a picture like a chainsaw, right? And I was interested in color and you miss that sometimes. He, you know, he was very good, funny, bright, conversational, right? Talked all the time. Brooks is dead, Diller's dead, and Marca-Relli came to my last opening. Hadn't seen him in years. Marvelous wife, South American woman. Terrific guy, and my friendship with Brooks went on until he died. And I still call his wife, absolutely, twice a year, at least.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Who, Brooks?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Charlotte Brooks, Charlotte Park. And uh, fucking people are old you know, I feel like I'm 40 when I talk to them, and they're in their 80s.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, Brooks started back doing figure work in the Depression and all.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: WPA, yeah, WPA.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well that in itself, I mean, you realized these men had a certain breadth to them, didn't you? [00:20:00]

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Oh yeah, anyway, you knew that anyway. Yeah, you talked to them for three minutes, you didn't know a goddamn thing about them, short conversation I'm talking about five minutes, right? All of a sudden you realize this guy knows, as they would say in Pennsylvania, "Where the bear shit in the buckwheat." [They laugh.] Marvelous group of people Albers had around him. Bandwagon people.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you were able to avoid what you warned against, the New York suction tube, I mean, for a while.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: I would say my paintings were influenced more by Pollock than anyone after I got out of that school. Yeah. Very heavily.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But I mean, at that time.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Oh yes, at that time, no I did not get sucked in, up into it, never did. No. But I admire it. Uh, Pollock and de Kooning, Pollock in particular.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was it you liked there?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: I talked to the curator at the Met, what's her name? Black woman. Well anyway, we had dinner one night, a group of us, and she said, "They don't hang your pictures at the Met." I said, "They don't hang anybody's pictures, I know people who have pictures there," she said, "But X has taken it to her office where everybody must go through and there it hangs." And I said, "You should take that down and hang it by the Pollock." She said, "I know that." She said, "They're very much the same, aren't they?" I said, "Yes." That birches thing, you know, you see all over mine?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. The birches?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Yeah. That's a fucking Pollock. And she knew that, I can't remember her name—[inaudible]—anyway, she said, "I would love to do that," but she said, "That's the Met, right?"

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, yeah. The um, now when you were in New Haven did you feel a little removed or were you glad to be? So, you could just go down to New York as you wished?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Oh yeah, that was just—

ROBERT F. BROWN: You never wanted to be in the thick of—[inaudible]?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: No, no, no, never, never, never, [00:22:00]. But that was like being in New York, I mean you'd get on that train and it was very inexpensive and you'd be in New York in nothing flat, and I spent a lot of time in New York then. Then when I married my late wife, she had a place in New York, 35th and 2nd, an apartment, and we kept that for years. And then when we left it, I stored paintings in it, right, for years. Until finally the landlord, it's one of those rent control where it had to be a primary place of residence and he went in there, the fucking thing was filled with my big pictures, you know, up front and back and everything else so we had to get out. Jesus fucking Christ, and I took the pictures on the top of my car, and just put them on, you know, and strapped them down on a—and some of them blew off on the way down, and the police gave me shit for throwing stuff on the highway. I had to pick them all up, and maybe I got 25 percent of them back in one piece.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Really, you were bringing them up here?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. You taught at Yale for ten years, through '65 or something, but by then you'd already got this place here? In, uh—[inaudible.]

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Oh, got it in '60. Got it in '60, and we were here most of the time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What prompted that, to come up here? How did you learn about it?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: I went to French Canada where the Taft family, you know, William Howard, Mr. Republican, they had a son who was a nuclear physicist and he and I were very close friends at Yale and I would go up there and fish with him where they had, if recollection serves me correctly, 100 square miles hunting and fishing range. And they thought I was certainly a communist, right? And they dragged the shit out of me, and I adored them. They were really, really nice people, all dead now. And then I said I'll go up there, and I went up there and said if I live up here I'll have to work on French and I don't want to do it. So, I just I drifted down through here. I knew Alex Katz, he was here, more importantly I knew Lois Dodd, and Lois Dodd said, "I know where there's an old farm." [00:24:00] She brought me up and showed me this. Hundred and seven acres, all these buildings, 2,500 bucks. And then I just started buying land—I was selling paintings. Started to sell some paintings. I'd have 500 bucks, and land was basically five bucks an acre and I bought it, and bought it, and bought it, and bought it, and bought it, and bought it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now you've got, what, 1,500?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Maybe a little more, 15, 18 somewhere in there. Hard to tell. And then Polly said, "Okay, that's it, that's—"

ROBERT F. BROWN: Polly was your wife?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: —that's enough," she said. And I said, "Too big." And she said, "I know," and she said, "I know what to do with it," I said, "What?" She said, "Get friends you trust with land, and negotiate it for them." Uh, Joe Goldstein, the guy who wrote *Beyond the Best Interests of the Child*, and so on, lawyer, psychoanalyst from Yale. Old, old friend. So I got him, Fred Wiseman the filmmaker, he lives right here. And he just finished a film right here, staying in Sheila's studio, just shot a film in Belfast which should be very interesting. Has two English cameraman, soundman, and they were staying at his house. And he has a—they have a big house over there, both he and Joe, and he called me and said, "You know, these fucking guys," he said, "I get home—that guy drives himself," he said, "I get home and I'm—" and he said, "They want to talk about what they shot all day," and he said, "I can't handle it." So, he just stayed here, I think for six weeks in Sheila's studio. He's there, Joe Goldstein's there, then my closest friend, Cy Lussman [?] is over there, in one of the great, great sites in Maine. I got that for him. These people were all Jews, and so I didn't know what the climate was up here, so I was the strawman. I bought all the stuff, signed it over to them. Cy Lussman was like a brother to me, he and I were really close at Yale—psychoanalyst. He came up here and drowned in Pitcher Pond. Had a sailboat he brought up here for my kids, he'd been on the Cape, and he brought it up here and went out on the fucking thing and drowned there. [00:26:00] Body blow. But his wife stayed, and my friend Frank Kawasaki designed their house. And he was also friends with the other crowd. Then a guy named Dick Newman who was quite old, bought a huge piece over in there. He died, wife died, and that now belongs to his grandchildren. So collectively, we had about 3,000 acres. At least.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was the attraction here for you? I mean—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Because this was like French Canada, but the people spoke English. If you were in the right neighborhood, right?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. What did you like about French Canada, I mean—or you liked the rural?

[Cross talk.]

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Land, landscape. Yeah, very rural, but the landscape was dazzling.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The combination of, uh—?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: But like this, get here, it's like this. St. Lawrence, inland, up the Chicoutimi, and easy, laidback. I also knew at that time of the Canadian seven and Tom Thompson, who I think are among the great painters of the century. And so I realized it wasn't a complete fucking vacuum, right? If those guys came out of there, something good had to be up there. But speaking French was just a pain in the ass, I mean anybody that don't speak French—because I'd studied Latin, right, they speak that patois which is impossible. And so, I ended up here.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you liked, uh—you wanted to be to yourself as much as you could, when you were teaching, you—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: All the time. All the time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —and you were—were you drifting, or drifting, you were doing—beginning to do landscapes? [00:28:00]

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Oh yeah, oh yeah. No, I went up—I went up there very distinctly to paint the landscape.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So when you were at the Tafts', for example, you were up there painting. You weren't just up there fishing?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: I was just up there fishing and making drawings. They all burned in this house, pain in the ass. Then Horace Taft, who was my close friend, died very abruptly with a heart attack at Yale. He was still doing very serious physics, but was the—became the dean, took on too much. Unbelievably nice man. Unbelievably nice man. But this whole community here, where I'm referred to as a wandering goy, were friends of mine from Yale. The whole thing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mmm. Were they typical of the close friends you made at Yale?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Absolutely.

ROBERT F. BROWN: On one hand you had the Tafts, on the other hand your very Jewish friends.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Yeah. Yeah. You went to people who were smart, and were interested in painting. You know, you just migrate there if you're smart, and I am smart, even I know that. And that's—you migrate to those people. I remember one night we were—I played banjo, five string banjo, and Horace Taft played guitar. And he would do all those, the worst—the most sentimental country songs he could find, he would do them. "I Heard the Crash on the Highway" and that kind of stuff. And we would sit up at that camp and play. And one night, I'm playing "Big Grand Coulee Dam," know that song? And Bob Taft gets up, "Goddamn public works shit, you are a red!" He would laugh, he would laugh.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This was the senator?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: They had a breadth to them, didn't they? [00:30:00]

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Hey man, man, man, rich roots. Yeah, yeah. And very, very imperious, right? They knew who they were, where they'd come from, what they'd done, and did not talk about it, did not dwell on it, but it gave them a kind of manner that was marvelous.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you think you admired that, because of your own kind of—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: No, it interested me greatly, right? Interested me greatly.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But because you also liked people who were creative and bright, of [ph] these people you got—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: They were creative and bright. We—Horace Taft and I threw a Christmas party every year at his house, and it would be half nuclear physicists and half artists. Right, always a shebang, and I learned

a very interesting thing there, I don't want to overstate it, but anyway, a nuclear physicist talking, just talking. And I knew a lot about physics by the way, through him, and through reading, and hanging out at the accelerator they had there, and so on. Uh, they talked like painters, there were no numbers, no, none of that shit. Well you know, how about this, consider this, right? *Dun, dun, dun, dun, dun, dun*. And I could pretty much follow that stuff, so that was a treat.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. They were forever questioning or venturing, or—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: In their conversations about their field, yeah. Yeah, yeah. Open, open, open. And uh, I think very convoluted, very dense, but on the face of it, conversational. Yeah. Good friends.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Which is something you said you admired like, Albers coming to you, "Well, you might consider this"—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: That's right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —that always throwing you back in your pen. [00:32:00]

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: That's right. Absolutely. Because what they all did was put the thing back in your lap, and did not give you answers. Albers, never, just put it back in your lap, with some questions. That's what education is. [Laughs.] You know that, right?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now, sir, as teacher, how do you recall it at Yale, you taught? What was your approach? Would you—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: I taught there classes with parameters, which were design classes and what they were about was material. What will material deliver to you, right? And so, it was all about that. And then when Albers left I went to Penn.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You, you set limits, then, it was a very clearly defined course you taught at Yale.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Very. Very. And Albers liked it because it would take off, right? And among the student body things would breed things, and breed things, and breed things, until finally, you know, something would come of it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You knew very well that by setting these limits, and all, that this would happen.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: The limits were exactly the same that Albers has in the square. Within those parameters, all kinds of things are possible. I would have them working with wet cement with no forms, right? First of all, you get a lot of cow patties, and then people find ways, and Albers was absolutely fascinated by that. When I went to—I also taught a drawing class to architects there, and they said you can have a student assistant, and said, I just want to see what they do. So they brought stuff by, it was pretty poor, and all of a sudden, I go through a portfolio, Jesus Christ, I couldn't believe it. I said, "Who's this?" Japanese-American guy named Kawasaki, *da, da, da, da*. [00:34:00] So he taught for me there, and then he left, went down to study with Louis Kahn at Penn. When I left Yale, I went down, and he picked up, and was down there, he was my assistant. And I said, "You do it," and I just taught graduate students. And the thing about teaching graduate students is, first of all they come trained, by and large. And they come fucked up, because they've studied with Sam, Joe, Sally, Betty, whoever. And so the critical and first part of that teaching was, making clear to them that their painting was absolutely loaded with the work of the people they studied with. And talk to them about ultimately, what do you want to do? What is it you want to do? And some of those kids would go from being very skilled, to becoming goddamn near primitive again. They'd take it right back to square one. And out of that they would build their own stuff. No, they did not paint like me, any of them. And they would go back, and finally they would find their own style. And that's what teaching graduate students is about. You get them out of the shit they've been embedded in, and say, What do you want to do? Not Elaine de Kooning, not *da, da, da*, what do you want to do? And hard work, hard work, and persistent. And then there would be an occasional one where you would say, they can't do it. Not because they didn't have all the skills, but because they could not take that intellectual leap to go find out what the hell they wanted to do. And they were always the people that were afraid of giving up the sometimes incredible skills they had, but the best of them would give it up, and go back, and start from scratch, and do marvelous stuff. [00:36:00] And that's really what that teaching was about. Am I making sense? Yes. Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Very much. Yeah, undergraduates, on the—in contrast, weren't that far along, by and large.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: No, no, no, no, no, no. And Frank Kawasaki ended up with that, and then the undergraduate department was under the auspices of the History of Art, and they finally turned that over to us, so I hired some faculty for that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, it does make sense, and then—and you had a high percentage of people then, who found their own way.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Oh shit man, there's painters all over New York who studied with me.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And uh, but it sometimes took weeks, I guess, to divest them of their, uh—what they came with.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: First year. Absolutely, I mean, could almost cut it off with a knife. You know, that first year would be a wild and painful struggle for them, and then they would get it. Sometimes they would come back after the summer, they would take it home, come back and show you some stuff, and you'd say—*click*—"go with it, go with it." And then you discuss it in terms of the way it's structured, and so on, which relates back to the original stuff they came with. Not structured that way anymore, sometimes not structured any way, the best of all possible worlds, but in motion. Yeah. In motion.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And it worked, I mean, in most cases—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Ah, Jesus Christ man, I'm telling you a lot of the very best painters in this country studied there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So, you—were you—as you look back, were you firm? Were you, would these graduate students—would you critique them harshly? Or how—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Not harsh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Every case you'd have to think of a different way of pulling them out of the—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Not harshly, no. I would say no. Compared to Albers, no. But firm, yes. Firm but not harsh. If you have [00:38:00] harshness you have to have the age, the persona and so on, of a guy like Albers, and I didn't have that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Well you came to what—head the whole thing.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Yeah. Bob Engman and I did it together. And then Bob said he didn't want to do it anymore, so I ran it up to the end. Then I had a coronary and I quit.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, you quit what, in uh, '89?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: I—fuck, I don't know, been a while. A while ago. I got a call—I had an administrative assistant, who had gone to secretarial school, she could've run General Motors out of her purse. She was fucking bright. That made it—see I never taught much, I'd come up here, I would paint, and I would go down there every two weeks for two and a half days. She called me once, and I had a sociopathic student, and an Israeli girl. And he launched an anti-Semitic attack on her—very rough stuff—at the top of his voice in the hall, and she called me. Three times in 25 years she called me. She said, "Look, this happened, this is what was said," and I said, "I'll come down." And I should have gone immediately, but I waited until I was gonna go, which was six days away or whatever. I went down, got the school together, gave them a talk. Hugh O'Donnell, I said, "Do you want to run a school someday? Come up, this is a part of it you don't see often."

ROBERT F. BROWN: Hugh O'Donnell was a—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: The guy who's now at BU.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, but the friend of yours.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Yeah, yeah, well worked for me then. So, I started out with anti-Semitism, I went down racism, ethnicism, the whole goddamn thing. And I was hot under the collar, right? So, I said, "Okay, we're finished, go," and they went. And Hugh comes up to me said, "Jesus Christ, never seen you angry." I said, "I don't get angry very often," but I said, "That is the thing in this world that will anger me." He said, "You scared the shit out of those students." I said, "I meant to." So, I go down to my office, she comes in, said, "He's here, the guy who did it." I said, "Send him in." So, he comes in, and he sits down, and he just looks at me. [00:40:00] And I look at him, he said, "I'm sorry I'm heavy sometimes." I said, "You're heavy all the time." He said, "May I ask you a question?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Are you a Jew?" I said, "Maybe before the 12th Century, but since then, no, I'm not." But I said, "I'm a Hebrophile." He says to me, "I don't know what that means." And I said, "Well, I'll tell you." I said, "Doors have been opened for me, rugs rolled out, things made possible that were not possible, without solicitation. And a large percentage of those people were Jews and that gives you a view of things." Yeah, he said, "I hope I haven't caused myself a lot of trouble." I said, "A lot of trouble." He's got ombudsman, provost, the whole thing. He said, "What?" I said, "I'm going to fuck you the rest of your life." I said, "This is the

greatest school in the world, widely acknowledged, if your name ever comes in front of me, I'm going to stick it up your ass, that's the price you pay for this, and thank you very much, we're finished." Then he leaves, and I go to the train, get on, my arms start to ache, my legs start to ache, *da, da, da*, stop in Portland, say I should go to the hospital, I said, no. Drove all the way up here. By that time, it was full blown. Came with an ambulance, took me to the hospital and uh, pain was ferocious. Next morning, I woke up, there was my late son Eli, Sheila, and the cardiologist. And I would wake up, and I would see them clearly for a second, then, *bonk*. So, I was—next morning I woke up, and there they were, and I was awake. I got up and I went—and this doctor should do this for you, because he was marvelous—I went—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Pulled everything off, all the tubes?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Took everything off and got out of bed. And I went over, and my clothes were on a chair, I started to put my—he said, "What's happened?" I said, "I'm out of here." He said, "Why?" I said, "If I stay here I'll have a heart attack." He said, "You've already had a heart attack." I said, "But, I'll have two. The second one will kill me. So, if you want to see me, come to my home." Came home, I slept for two days [00:42:00] Polly crying, Eli upset. Slept for two days and two nights, like dead, out of it. And he came and saw me, went and had the tests, and the fact of the matter is, I had no arterial disease, I was not plugged up at all, and then I got a long lecture about stress heart attacks. He said, "You ever seen anyone who has an eye tick, they go like that all the time?" I said, "Oh sure, I've seen that many times." He said, "That's what your aorta was doing." He said, "That's a stress heart attack." I said, "What do I do?" He said, "Don't stress yourself like that again. Don't put yourself in a position to get angry like that." I said, "That's maybe two, three times in my life." And he said, "Don't do it again. And when you get tired, rest." I said, "That's good advice." And he said, "I want to see you every week for six months, and then every two weeks after that for the rest of the year." I said, "I'm going to Allagash." He said, "When?" I said, "Three days." He said, "Come in tomorrow, will you?" I said, "Sure." So, I come home, he gives me all the reports, "You have a little six percent infarture in the back—lower back of your heart," he said, "Some people have that don't even notice, nothing's critical. You're not plugged up." And I come in, and we sit down, and he takes me through the stress thing again, and he said, "Who are you?" I said, "I'm nobody. I'm like the rest of your patients, I'm nobody." Well he said, "Let me tell you something, the dream of my life was to talk to Pasternak at Harvard. Greatest cardiologist in the world. And he called me and talked to me about you for a half an hour. X called from Yale, Y called from Penn." He said, "How do you account for that?" I said, "Coincidence." Marvelous guy with a beard, he puts his face up to me, and says, "As you would say, bullshit." [They laugh.] I've never seen him again professionally since then. Never. Have no problem.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And this was just before you retired? No. [00:44:00]

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: No. The one—and he also said to me, "You ought to try being three people instead of four." I said, "Give me an example." He said, "Quit Penn," he said, "You say you have a third ear, I have one too." And he said, "That is thematic, that's pressure on you, you're tired of it, you're finished with it." And I called up the next day and quit. Just as simple as that. Good advice, good advice.

[END OF TRACK.]

This is track one of two side B.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You stayed with teaching then from '55 through '89, so—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: That's right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —you must have found that a pretty fulfilling thing in many ways, right?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Yes. I would not have done it if I—you know, I would not have done it. But as I said before, and I say this to every young person, I did very little of it, and absolutely insisted on that. You know, if Penn had said, Well, you'll have to come for one week every other week, I would have said, Thank you but no thank you. They wanted me, and so they were prepared to do that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And that was true also, earlier at Yale, too.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You felt that the absolute uh, minimal contact time—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Yeah, but intense. Minimal but intense. You know, we were talking about earlier, and the number of students that get a teaching job and that's the end of the show is large, right? Large. And the administrative people in the university don't give a goddamn, they work the hell out of them, and so they can't do their work. I mean they go home wrecked from the university and then they can't paint. A lot of them have families and so on, they have other responsibilities. And I was very, very aware of that. And so, I just—when

Penn asked me I said on these terms and they said okay, and that was that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you'd seen it happening at Yale and other places.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: I see it happen everywhere.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Everywhere.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Everywhere, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Did Albers hang around school much or was he—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: No.

ROBERT F. BROWN: He too spent most of his time on his own?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Oh yeah, he was there, "He's here? He's here? Albers is here?" And he would spend the day, nine to four, be gone, and wouldn't—he may not come the rest of the week. Yeah. No, no his painting time was sacrosanct. [00:02:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: In contrast to that, what was the effect as teachers, the qualities of teaching of those who hung around five days a week, or so? The teachers, that is?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: The—first of all, they are not artists anymore, they fail at that, and hence they have nothing to teach except that they learned when they were students. And that's what, that's 90 percent of the people that teach in this country. Lethal, yeah. And very bad for their students.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you think you were fortunate at Yale, and then at Penn, in having an administration that realized that?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Oh yeah, oh yeah. Very, very, very.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Who were—who was it at Penn? Who were some of the more enlightened people at—some fairly well-known figures?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: It was Holmes Perkins, the dean. And he was a very tough guy, and a very grouchy guy. Uh, I found him marvelous. Went down there and met, and he said, "I'd like you to come here and teach," and I said, "Okay." Then he said, "This is your position, tenured, and this is the salary." And I said, "Okay, that's great." And then he said, "And you will have tenure." And I said, "That's not something I'm interested in." He said, "It goes with the job." Done.

ROBERT F. BROWN: He was direct?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Very direct, to the point. Yeah. And Louis Kahn, I liked Louis Kahn very, very much and he and Louie had a pissing contest that went back before my time going. So, Louis was there, but it was really brutal.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Really? They didn't see eye to eye?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Well, Louis was uh, knew exactly who he was, and what he had done, and the idea of anyone being in a position to say anything to him was anathema. And so, he never could—I told him that one time, and he said, "That's not what it's about." And I said, "I don't want to know what it's about." I let it go. [00:04:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you get to know him pretty well otherwise?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Very well, because I knew him at Yale. I accused him of something one time, he started to laugh. Louis Kahn would spin a story around, and around, and around, and around, always wild metaphors, and so on. And we were having sandwiches and some coffee, and I said to Louis, "I know where your lectures come from." He said, "They come from me." I said, "Well, yeah, ultimately. But not really." He said, "Where do they come from?" I said, "From Paul Klee's pedagogical sketchbook." And Louis started laughing, he said "I read it." I said, "You read it a lot." A door wants to be. The door will tell you that it wants to be, and all of a sudden it became animate, right? And that's the way he discussed it. Very, very brilliantly, I mean, there's no degradation involved, but that's the way he talked. That was the way he talked.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And to a degree, that's the way Kahn built.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Absolutely, absolutely. No, no, he was the whole cloth, right? He was the real McCoy.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And when you were at Yale, was that—were you still at Yale when he did the the art?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: I was, in fact, there when he did it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. You saw it in process.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: You'd see him in process. He would be standing across the street, early in the morning, and he would just be standing there, and he'd just be looking. There was nothing, there's two fucking flat facades, right? But that's why it's a great building, he wanted it to be not six inches taller, see, and he would just look, and look, and look, and look, and look. [00:06:00] Did that all the time. The one thing he was very pissed off at Penn was that, here was Louis Kahn at Penn, they gave him one fucking medical building which sits back and uh, can't find it. And Holmes Perkins and—formed a, he was a trained architect, and so he formed his own company, and they built that goddamn endless high-rise housing and all those things down there, and Louis didn't get anything. And that was very insulting. Everybody knew it, talked about it, but that obviously must have rankled him terribly.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Because Kahn was obviously definitely the star, wasn't he?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Yeah, star. Star, national star.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What—were you still at Yale when the art school building went up?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: If you look at that long column there, you'll see my name right down the edge of it. Paul Rudolph, doesn't work for the shit. Nope. Doesn't work for the shit.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It's been said that the students, when they went in there, "Where do we work? We can't stand the—"

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: True story, that's not a street story, that's a true story.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What do you think went wrong?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Not good enough. Uh, wildly ambitious, and just in over his head. And took wild license with it, right? And those—you know those fucking outside cookie—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, yeah. Corrugated, kind of.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: They built those goddamn forms up near, I was living in a Quonset hut then, they built the forms up there. Jesus Christ, that must have cost the price of a building. [00:08:00] Just to build them. And then they would—and they took them off, and what did they get? Very smooth units so the stone masons went up and down on scaffolds and chipped all those edges off. Made it look like—what the fuck's the name of that cookie, Keebler? No, the flat one with the ridges in it?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, I don't know.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Well. And I went down a hallway one—down the stairway that one time, and I went around the corner and I hit the edge of one of those things, and I got a real fucking abrasion from it. Not life-threatening or anything, but a real abrasion. I went right down, went to Paul Rudolph's office and I said, "You're a dumb motherfucker, you see that? I got that on your walls." He said, "Don't hit the walls." I said, "I promise you, I'll never do it again, but a lot of people will." Paul Rudolph still comes to my openings. He was very gay, by the way, very light, gay. And he came to the last one, he had his hair, still cropped, and had it dyed that bright red, right? Came in, we talked, and, how you doing, what you doing, I'm doing a lot of work in Indonesia now. And a week later, I did a playground for him, I painted it. And uh—

[Audio break.]

[Cross talk.]

Yeah, uh, yeah, I saw him, we talked, and a week later, unexpectedly so, he sends me a whole beautiful series of photos of that playground. All of which he knows burned in my house, right? I didn't have any. And he sent them all to me—no note, no comment, no nothing, just sent them.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So he's very respectful of you—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Well, uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —and, even though you told him what for some years ago.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Yeah. Oh yeah, often. [00:10:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. At Penn, were you able to uh, when you got there—say, was that—in the '60s, were you able to kind of develop a department, or was there good—were you handed a number of people that you had to weed through?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: No, it was a cultural event. The best poets, all of whom I knew came, musicians, Virgil Thompson.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You brought them into—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Yeah. To do gigs, and uh, long gigs, right? Artie Shaw, big range of stuff, and writers and blah, blah. Filmmakers and so on, so that was constant, that place was alive, right? And the best painters in the country, all of whom I knew. And that's the only way you can do it, you have to know them, right? Call up and say, "Will you do this?" And try to find out first if they were impecunious at that moment, and that was the time to get them. So, it was very lively, and very, very good. And I—all the guys I had there taught the way I did, right? Go in and discuss inevitably with the student where they got the ideas from. And then take them back to square one.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Where they got their ideas? Or, where the student got his—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: No, where the students got their ideas, which would—came from their—yeah. Point them out to them.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, yeah.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Elaine de Kooning taught for me—about everybody taught for me, everybody. Tried to get de Kooning through Elaine, he said no, he had spent enough time at "jail" university to last him the rest of his life. [They laugh.] Speaking of Yale, right? So, he never came, but everybody else did.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you had fairly free hand from the university, then, it sounds like.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: I insisted on it. Yeah. Absolutely insisted on it. You know, that or nothing. Because you can't—once you put any idea or move into that bureaucratic machine it's just ground into hamburger. So, I just absolutely ignored that. [00:12:00] Never had a faculty meeting, never had a committee, right? And the dean one time said, "You don't have any faculty meetings." I said, "No," said, "but we go to lunch together and he'll say, "Well, you know, Sally's having a hard time now," and I said, "I know that," and then they say, "Yeah, you ought to"—and I'd say, "Then I'll talk to them." And that's a hell of a lot better than sitting at a table. And that's the way it was run. Very, very closely, right? I do not mean to imply that it was loose because it wasn't. But did not go through the formal machinery, which was lethal.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So, you were able to fine-tune, or adjust just like that?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Oh God, oh yeah. Yeah. And all the deconstruction sharks that were circling never dared bite me, because I was crank, right? And so, they didn't. And then when I left they moved in, and there was a feeding frenzy. They just fucking ate the place alive. I'm walking in the hall one day and I see Martin Marzan [ph] the former president, with a German art historian, his name's out of my mind, doesn't matter, anyway. And Martin says, "Come in here a minute, I want to talk to you." So, I went in, and he said, "You know Bob Susky [ph]?" I said, "Very well," I said, "He and I worked side by side at Yale." And he said, "What do you think of him?" I said, "He's one of the brightest people I've ever known in my life." And they said, "We're thinking of him for chairman, what do you think of that?" I said, "Don't do it." He said, "Why not?" I said, "He's an ideologue, ideologues are bad for students." They did it, Bob lasted one fucking term, had a student insurrection, out. So, then I'm in New York at my last show, I get a call from Pat Conway, a Canadian who's a new dean. She said, "Would you have lunch with me?" I said, "Sure." She comes to New York, takes me to a very fancy place. And I said, "What are you doing?" She said, "Well, we've just formed a committee, we're looking for a new chairman." [00:14:00] I said, "I have a chairman for you." She said, "What?" She said, "Who?" I said, "Mark Strand." Poet laureate of the United States, trained as a painter, he's written about every artist in the country. He's wildly bright. And she said, "Well, how do you know he'd do it?" I said, "Oh, I called him." And so, they give a chair in my name, and I go down, and they have a big doing. And we go over to her house, Mark Strand. And I said, "You stay here." She invites him. I said, "You stay here." We're going down—we stayed with Bob Stern. And so he called me a few days later, and I said, "What came down?" He said, "She offered me a job," and he said, "I told her I didn't want a job, I wanted to do what you did, and I could do it better." I said, uh—and they said she wasn't buying. But she said, "We formed a committee," and I said, "You're not an academic, are you?" She said, "No I'm a professional." I said, "What do you do?" She said, "I'm an interior decorator." And I said, "Let me tell you what

committees are for. What do you think they're for in academia?" And she said, "Well, to facilitate things." I said, "No, it's not for that." "Well, what's it for?" I said, "They are facades, built to keep the faculty busy behind which someone makes an executive decision. That's what they're about. And you will find that out." She lasted a year, down the road. They're both sitting there tenured, no fucking students, and the school is a wash.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So Strand didn't take it.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Didn't get it, didn't want it—didn't want it on the terms. [Inaudible]—chairman's job, which is more bullshit, right, and he didn't want that. He wanted to put a—keep that cultural thing that was there, that broad thing going.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And all those years you were there you were able to keep that going, and bringing in—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Keep it going because—because nobody could bite me, right? And so, they didn't.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And they couldn't bite you because you, uh, the results you got from students, the reputation?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Oh, no, no, the word goes out, see, [00:16:00] this—and people say that, too, and they say uh, really? And then they—and they all know it, and everybody—in the art world—everybody knows it. Funny story, I had Artie Shaw, and he was a friend of mine, he agreed to come. Getting older, and he gets up, and he starts talking about music, this that big band, jazz. And we have a kid in the back who's a real fucking wiseass, right? Full of himself, privileged boy. So, Artie—the kid gets up and he said, "Look I just heard Thelonious Monk at the X Club in Harlem," whatever it was, Cotton Club, we'll say, "down there and man, oh man. You should have heard that. And he played a riff," and the kid does it. [Simulates music.] And, "Did you hear that?" Artie said, "Yeah," he said, "Thelonious is a friend of mine. So, I went up to hear him, as he would come to hear me," and he said, "I walked in," and he said, "All the best tables in the front were taken by people of your age, and may I say of your attire," Artie could—and he said, "They were sitting up in the front, and they were going—[simulates music]—snapping their fingers—[simulates music]." He said, "Man, that isn't what he was playing." [Laughs.] Classic. Classic fucking ballbusting.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.]

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: And, and the students got, they got hysterical laughing, fucking kid sat down, red, chagrined, to say the least. And then Artie went on, took the rest of the questions. Very intelligent answers. So, it was that kind of thing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And so someone like Artie Shaw then, might perform or might, uh—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: No, no. They could have if they wanted to, that was always left open to them, by the way. [00:18:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: —it was sort of a get-together—[inaudible].

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: [Inaudible.] Yeah, yeah, yeah. Not a, not a lecture always, but just—

ROBERT F. BROWN: He might be around for several days, or—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: —a couple days, yeah, a couple days. Just hang around, go to the studios, look around.

ROBERT F. BROWN: These—in the early years, these students then, when they left the program, when they graduated, what would they go on to try to—on their own, or would a good many go into teaching because in the late '60s it was still very—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: A lot of them them—a lot of them moved to New York and did what I did, fucking shit work, right? Short order cook, bartend, wait tables and that, and then they would paint at night. And then others would be lured into teaching jobs, and I must say, alas, that by and large they fell. They fell.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It was illusory wasn't it? I mean, the system—studio art was expanding like lightning in academia, right? In the '60s into the '70s.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: You know, they made a classic error that a young person would make. They would look at me, I'm running the place. There's Bob Engman, he's head of sculpture. [Inaudible] at printmaking and so on, and we were fucking productive, man. We were on the scene, productive, the stuff was being seen and everything. And they assumed you could teach and do that. And no one ever asked me, Why are you here so little? Why, *da, da, da, da*? Never, never said, they just assumed you could be it. And then they'd go into an academic institution as an instructor or whatever, and those goddamn places would eat them alive, they had no

time to work. Lots, I saw a bunch of them there the other night, they were just kind of sad. You know, worn out, beat up, distressed looking, with a kind of pall of depression about them. And then they tell you about their job they have, and I'm teaching, and I ran [00:20:00] into—I said to Sheila 10, but maybe more down there—they were teaching full-time. Every day of the week. Not the whole day, mind you. So, that's the illusion of seeing someone who's doing it, teaching, and not figuring out that they're, that you know, you don't see them very often.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, yeah. But after teaching, in your own case too, you're fairly drained, aren't you?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Drained? God almighty! Run as fast as you can, get a martini just to try to recover two or three hours.

ROBERT F. BROWN: These people doing that every day, they—[inaudible]?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: I would go and make—I would go and I had a printmaker living in my place down there, my Japanese cutter. I had a—I bought a whole house, and he was there, and I'd go back, and I'd work with him, we'd go through prints. And I'd go down to my friend Kawasaki's, we'd have Japanese dinner one night, and then the next night I would come home.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So these people who are teaching every day of the week, they have no time for that—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: They have no time for anything. Brutal, brutal. I have a secret hard-on for academic institutions, the way they operate, because they—people of substance they slay. Right? They just kill them. I was poor, too. I look at these students, and I know goddamn well what they're going through. How am I going to do it? What do I—how do I support it? And—every one of them.

ROBERT F. BROWN: There were a few that hung on as short order cooks there in New York, so to speak.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Yes, and then they—oh yeah, that's—they're all painting. They're all painting. Uh, you can tell them about that. That danger. And I certainly did, you know. But they don't hear it. They think in some way you're bullshitting, right? He's doing it. [00:22:00] Great tragedy in my—Jesus Christ, and then there were wealthy kids. Kids from good families, and they did it because in their families it was prestigious to teach in an Ivy League school or something like that. So, they did it for those reasons. They got caught up just the same as the others. As the poor kids.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now this whole time, beginning in the early '60s at least, you were beginning to have important exhibitions of your work.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Whatever that means.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, I mean, ones that got noticed, somewhat. [Inaudible.] You started out in New York with a—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Tell you, I went with Marlborough, very interesting.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —that's—you don't do that, really, until the early '80s, I guess. Something like that.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: No. I was at Fischbach and I would get—I got invitations from maybe 10 galleries in New York City, if you decide to move, *da, da, da, da*, would you consider us? And I never answered them, I'd just put them in an envelope and send them to Aladar. So, one day I go in, I'm in the gallery, I said I'm going to talk to Pierre Levee [ph]. He said, "You're leaving us." I said, "I don't know that. He asked me to come talk to him, I'm going to talk to him." So, I go up and Pierre's pacing, he says, "Come on back to my office," and he sits down. And he said, "Do you have any questions?" I said, "Oh yes. What do you have to offer?" He uses the word important. Important books, important catalogues, important exhibitions in America, important exhibitions in Japan, important exhibitions in Europe. He keeps repeating that word. And I'm just listening. After a while he says to me, "What are you?" I said, "What do you mean, what am I?" "Well, what are your roots, your background?" I said, "American potpourri." I said, "In light of that question, what are you?" He said, "I am a French Jew who was harbored and educated by Jesuits." I said, "I'll go with the gallery." He said, "Just like that?" [00:24:00] I said, "Oh, yeah." He said, "How'd you make that decision?" I said, "Best goddamn credentials I've ever heard of." And that was it. It was done. Gave me a contract, I gave it to my lawyer, who was also one of my closest friends, right? And he rewrote it, took it back, and Pierre said, "Well, that's what we meant to say." And I said, "Well, apparently he didn't think you said it. And so, there it is." That was it. So, we just—and that's the way things happen. When they're going to happen, they happen.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, let's take it back a little bit.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Go ahead. No, no, no, sorry about that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: No. Your first show, like, you were with the—at the Stable Gallery in '60, 1962. Was that the first gallery you became involved with for a bit?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Yep, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How did that come about? [Inaudible.]

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Uh, somebody saw my work, and said either—where was the gallery? Who was Leo Castelli's sidekick? The guy—anyway, he opened his own gallery. Either he's gonna come up, they'd taken—[inaudible]—to the Stable. And I said, "Yes, terrific," and he said, "What are you going to do?" And I said, "I'm going to go with the first one that comes." Eleanor Ward was there, I think he told her, in two days, she'd gone and came up.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Up to New Haven—[inaudible]?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Yeah. Looked at the pictures and said, "I'd like to take you on." And I said, "Good. I'd like to be with you." And that's the way it happened. It was that simple.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, yeah. And you knew her by reputation, or you—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Oh, no, no, I knew the gallery, oh no. I knew the gallery from walking around, yeah. And then she got in trouble, and I left her. I'll tell you, at that time Jim Brooks was there, Joan Mitchell was there, Andy Warhol was there. What's her name the sculptor, Marisol. [00:26:00] So, it was a crowd of interesting people. And then she got in trouble, and they ended up—a lot of them sued her because work disappeared. And I'd done a big painting called, *The Burial of Count Orgaz*, which was a satire of *The Burial of Count Orgon* and that had disappeared. And so, I said, "Eleanor, I want that goddamn picture," *da, da*, and all of a sudden, she found it, she had lent it to someone. She found—this picture is eight by 10 feet, so I got the fucking thing in New York, on one of my homemade stretchers—[inaudible]—and Red Grooms said, "I'll store it for you." He had a big loft, so Red stored it for me. For years. Years, I'm talking about 30 years now. When he got married, Sheila and I went to the wedding and we took him something, I don't know, Bennington's something. Red came up with his wife, Chinese girl named Lisianne [ph] and he said, Lisianne [ph] knows what she wants for a wedding gift. And I said, "Is that the way it's done?" And he said, "Yeah. She wants that *Burial of Count Orgon*," I said, "Done." He said, "You can take the other gift home." I said, "I will." And so, that's where that painting is.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Huh. But Eleanor was in what, financial difficulties?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you get to know some of those other artists?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Oh, knew them all.

ROBERT F. BROWN: That led you to—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Oh, yeah. Well, no—

ROBERT F. BROWN: How would you size up a dealer? I mean among other—you'd see which artists she was handling?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Yeah. Oh, absolutely. And then, you know, the word on the street is "don't do that because, don't do that because." And then I went with Tibor de Nagy [ph], and I was very fond of Tibor, Johnny Myers was a fucking monster by anyone's standards, right? So, I went there, and showed with them.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And Myers, why do you mention Myers?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Because they were partners then. And they had a [00:28:00] pissing contest and Johnny Myers opened his own gallery, and I went to Tibor. I said, "Look, Johnny Myers in fact brought me here, and in light of that, I really should go with him." And Tibor, perfect gentleman, said "okay." And so I went with Johnny Myers, and he was a fucking pain in the ass. He went belly up, and who—Red Grooms had the last show before, and he went seriously belly up, right? And you just didn't get your money, that's all. And Red had had the last show and so he had a terrific debt with him. And Red never got paid, just wrote it off, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Some of these other artists, maybe you can mention them in passing, I know you talked about earlier, like Joan Mitchell, when did you get to know her?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Well, I knew her very slightly. She was at that gallery, and I'd see her there, and we'd talk a little bit. And I never mentioned her paintings to her. I was crazy about her. I thought she was really a

first-class painter. And then I told you Warhol was there, and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, but you hadn't mentioned—Warhol, you, did you—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Had lunch with him.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, did Eleanor try to—want you to talk with him or something?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Yeah, she said have lunch with him, and I did. Yeah. And then—

ROBERT F. BROWN: What did you think of him at that time?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: It was beyond me. He blew smoke up my ass all the time, he'd seen this picture and that, and everything, it was very boring, very boring. And—

ROBERT F. BROWN: What about Grooms, did you?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Oh no, Grooms—yeah, I've known him for many years. We don't see one another because I'm here, and he's there, and I'm in Allagash and he's—but he stayed right around here a few summers. Know Red, liked his work, still like his work.

ROBERT F. BROWN: He did that big thing for Philadelphia for the bicentennial.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Oh my, Jesus Christ, yeah. In all fairness to Red, he has a crew, right? [00:30:00] And to think that Red put every last touch of paint on that is bullshit. He has a full-time crew working for him because it's monstrous stuff. And uh—but Red is Red, and he will always be Red and that you can count on.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You admire him, and he knew himself and he sticks with it.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Yeah, yeah, oh yeah. No, no, he is what he is, and you know, done very well at it, yeah. And then, I knew Alex then, he was there, and he left.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Alex Katz.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Katz. He left—

ROBERT F. BROWN: He was with Stable you mean?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: —uh, he left. And in fact, when Pierre Levee [ph] called me, he told me that Red Grooms thought it important I be at that gallery, so I owe that to Red. When I went down to visit with him. Red's never mentioned it, he and I have never mentioned it together, but that—he in fact did that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Marlborough. And you were with Fischbach—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: And I was with Fischbach and that was Aladar Marburger who was an unbelievable dream, died of AIDS, who, God help us all, all those guys. But he's the one that sold my painting to the Met, to the Modern, to the *blah, blah*, right? And most of the big ones around the world and around the country, but he did. He'd just get on the goddamn train or plane and fly, and do it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: He was very direct and forceful?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Very, very direct, very funny guy. And I had great affection for him, but he was gay, and he got the bug.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you enjoy going to your openings, or would you make—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: No, no I never—I don't like openings. I go and I'm—

ROBERT F. BROWN: You'd go, but—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: —I'd go, it's required.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. What about collectors? Would you then—would they be, did you try to discourage them from being in touch with you, or were you—have you developed some pretty close—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Absolutely no, I have no connections with collectors. None. [00:36:00] If I do it relates to other, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It comes about for other reasons.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: For completely other different reasons.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Uh, what about once you've done your work, are you ready to release it?

[Cross talk.]

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: When I finish a painting, largely, I turn it to the wall, and I have no interest in it. Truck comes, it goes to New York. When they did that retrospective of mine, they started asking me, "Where are my paintings?" I said, "I don't know where my goddamn paintings are." Don't know anything about them, true. I never look at the—I look at the check, and say that seems about right. No, for me, it's all process. The painting I'm working on now, I'm very ambitious for, the one I just did is just like, it's residual. It's like tracks in the snow behind me.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The ones that we see here are ones that are—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Just finished, just finished. And there are nine in New York.

ROBERT F. BROWN: These will shortly be turned to the wall, so to speak.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Well, that one was to the wall until you came here. I thought I'd put a little color in here for you—[laughs]—and that one I just finished, right? That's where the goddamn hunters have driven me out of the woods, I'd be terrified to go down to that place now. But over there's the drawing for the little waterfall which is five miles up the stream from this on the same stream, and I've been in there, made that. I have some little color notes around that's on paper, and I don't think I can paint it here, I think I have to wait until hunting season is over.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. You simply can't risk getting out there.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: I don't want to do it, I don't want to do it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So it's—it's process, but it's also subject, it's also getting into something that—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Oh, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —unconsciously you want to get back to.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Oh, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —you can't always say—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: See, I very often paint the thing I'm painting five years after I've seen it. And I do not go looking for a site, ever. I just walk in the woods and muse. And after a while I'll see a place, or something. And there's a painting [00:34:00] coming up in this present show, which I first saw 10 years ago. Go back in the evening, go back in the morning, look at it, go back in midday and look at it, so on. And then one day I say, Oh well, I'll do it. Yeah. Never look for the highest mountain, the loftiest tree, none of that. No, never.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Doing it means going back in there and doing what, full paintings?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Yeah, yeah. Oh, yeah. Yeah, two feet or three feet. Yeah. Then I bring them back, and I have a very good elephantine visual memory, I'll remember those places down to the way pine needles were laying, which direction they were in, that sort of thing. I come back, and I paint, I do not copy the little painting, although they relate very closely. I do not copy the little painting, but I, like de Kooning, make it up as I go along. And refer to that all the time. But once finished, they're really finished for me. Finished. The next one, it's the next one. Someone said to me in Philadelphia, "Well, you love what you do." I said, "I hate what I do." He said, "You hate painting?" I said, "I hate painting." They said, "Really?" I said, "Yes, I hate it." "Why?" Interviewer. I said, "Because it's a reflection of yourself, it's like having a big goddamn mirror in the room. And you go in there, and," I said, "I go in and I look at the painting and I see a reflection there of my inadequacies. And I'm very analytical about them, I look at them, I say, 'What did I do, what did I do, what's happening here?' And then the next one is my salvation, I hope." And I said, "Looking at your own reflection every morning is a pain in the ass, humiliating, debasing, right?" [00:36:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Why do you go back to it, when you know that's—

[Cross talk.]

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Well, because you—it's like, for the same reason you clip your toenails.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Right. It's just with you, it's endemic. Impulse [ph].

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: That's right. Yep, yep, it's compulsive. Friends of mine come by here in their sailboats, and say, "You want to cruise with us for a couple days?" When they first came, some of them had big boats, I'd say yes, and I'd go out. And I would be on that boat five minutes and all of a sudden, I'd be reaching for lines, watching everything, and I said I can't sail, because if I ever sail, I won't paint. Same way with golf. I've never swung a golf club in my life, but I watched it on TV, and I said, "Neil, don't do that. Don't do that, because you'll be a dead dog." I don't have any paintings of mine hanging in my house, you notice, because if they were there I'd be working on them in my head, every minute.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you feel it more important to work on the next problems?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Oh yeah, oh, sure. Oh, sure. Am I making any sense or no?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes, you are. There has been a lot written on you, and one thing they go over is mechanical things such as, now he's doing landscapes, whereas he used to do figure in landscapes, and at one point he did figures. And uh, what's your reaction to that kind of thing?

[Cross talk.]

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: I think I painted a figure because it was like a historical necessity, everybody did it, right? And so I got into that, did that, and then, in fact, after a while it seemed to me the figures were a distraction, and I painted them exactly as I painted the landscape: open, full, right through them. And so, I just took them out. And if I live to be a thousand, I can't even begin to cover the stuff that's on my property here. [00:38:00] Yeah, the paintings, one after another, I see them all the time. All the time, all the time. Sheila, I rarely drive my car, because Sheila won't let me drive, she says, "You paint when you drive."

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, you mean you're not necessarily—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: No, I'm not watching the fucking road, I'm looking in the woods. A guy did an article here for a magazine, I can't remember, it doesn't matter, long time ago. And he said, "Riding with him is dangerous, because he paints as he drives." And I laughed my ass off, and I said, "Well, you're right." He's a very smart guy, I do it all the time, I get up thinking painting, I go to bed thinking painting, I think about painting places, sites, what happened, what didn't happen, so on. It's consuming. People say they hate television right, and won't have it in front of their children. I love television, I only see an hour a day, but I love it. Because suddenly there is enough there to—and doesn't have shit to do with anything I'm interested in, right? There's enough there to take me away from this infernal digesting and redigesting images, and places, and so on.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And that truly is the case. I mean, you—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Oh yeah, oh yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It's not tied in with some mystique of nature for you?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Oh, Jesus Christ, no that's bullshit, that's all bullshit. Oh no, that's all bullshit. I did that thing in San Antonio, huge crowd, I'd say a thousand people in an auditorium.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This was when, fairly recently?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Yeah. A month ago, show's still on. And, uh, they show that film I made, a PBS thing, and then answer questions. And guy comes up, and bottom line in the questioning is, how do you do it? And I say, "Look, you want a lecture on the history of art? I'll take you back to Mesopotamia, give it to you 10 years at a time, a decade at a time, and [00:40:00] we'll go through the whole of western art, and I can regale you for a month. Want to talk about the chemistry of paint? That's good for another day." *Da, da, da, da.* "But I do not know how I do it." So I said, "What do you think about me?" I said, "You just saw the movie. Banality." My kids, anything, and I said, "In a curious way, those processes allow you to paint, right?" Because suddenly you think about that stuff while you paint, and another thing happens, and that other thing that happens is certainly in the old Gestalt-sense, holistic, not subject to analysis, so I don't know. Finally, that question is phrased almost the same way three times, and I said, "I can only tell you that if I did know on some level, it's ineffable, I couldn't tell you, and it's very mysterious, and I really do not know." Finally, this is almost three hours later, guy gets up and says—very different, educated. And so, he finishes, and I say, "You know something about that question?" "What?" I said, "That question is bullshit." I says, "You rephrased the question that you're asking all evening, and I must tell you the honest to God truth, I would love to be able to tell you. It'd be easy." I said, "I'd take my hot little check and go home, but I don't know. I don't know, I've never known, and I do not know anyone who paints

substantially who does know. It's almost that you don't know as a requirement of the process."

ROBERT F. BROWN: There would not be process if you did know.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: That's right, exactly. Exactly. Right?

[END OF TRACK.]

This is tape two of two side A.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Second tape. We'll talk more maybe about process when we actually go look at some of your work.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Absolutely. Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: I just wanted to recap. You came to Lincolnville in—it was 1961?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: '60, '60? Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: To this farm, and then you fairly soon had a second family, and children came along, and these children, all sons, I believe?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: No, two sons and a daughter, daughter died. Go ahead.

[Cross talk.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: These were, uh—it was important for you to have several children, I take it, did you want that?

[Cross talk.]

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Well, no. No, no, no. But it was important for my wife and for me.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Your wife, Polly, was also an artist.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Yes. Very good painter. Yeah. And then she died, very young, at 37, with an immunity to a strep infection. *Bang, bang*. And this was six months after our daughter died.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And your daughter had also died very young.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Crib death, crib death. Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And that was right after the fire, right?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Precisely.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But your fire was in what, '70, '75, something like that?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: [Inaudible]—don't do the numbers, you'll make me cry. I don't know. But anyway, yeah. and then Polly died, and I had two small boys to rear. And I hired nannies and they helped me with it, and then I think five years later, or so, I married Polly—uh, married Sheila, Sheila.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Who is also an artist.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Also an artist, and also a very good painter. Uh, so, I've been down the road, as they say.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. And I guess, you know, do you think in your work, this compulsive work, uh, surely have there been times, when because of these tragedies particularly, but the events of new children, have you varied the pace, has it changed the thrust of things, do you think?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: No.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [00:02:00] So this is a very powerful life of its own, isn't it?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Very—some of those paintings, very sad, like that fire, over there, right? Okay, that relates back to that in some very obtuse way, I know that, yeah. I do not analyze, I do not think about it, but of course it does.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. But now, when we get down to this one, of the hole [ph], the stream, it's vibrant, and

lively, and energized throughout. There's that current as well, and they're more or less same time, aren't they?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Yes, yes, yes, yes. So that says to you I'm only depressed 50 percent of the time. I don't know the meaning of the word by the way. Depressed for me is a neurotic state. And I don't get depressed. I get sad for reasons, angry for reasons, but I don't uh, I'm not depressed.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, anger is also partly a symptom of your standards, right? Your very strong idea of what should be and what shouldn't be.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Absolutely.

ROBERT F. BROWN: We've talked about your fights against the highways and nuclear power in Maine, and so forth.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Oh, Jesus Christ. See I will not, there are—I'm old enough, puritanical enough, to tell you there are things that are right and things that are wrong. And Sheila said she agrees with me, but she doesn't address them, she says, "You do it with a hammer." Anyone makes an anti-Semitic, a racist, any kind of remark around me, I fucking let them have it. It's wrong, and A, I won't listen to it. Won't listen to it. I went to a party in Florida, I'll tell you about this, very funny. After my wife died, her mother was down there, we were both distraught, she said, "Come down, I want you to take me to a cocktail party as my escort, just we'll spend some time together." I said, "Okay." So, I go down—this is very fancy, the soft underbelly of the East of the United States, money and—so we go there, and go in, and the people are older than me and so I'm just trying to be unobtrusive, and look around, that sort of thing. [Cross talk.] I go into the corner, and I open up my Skol can, and I put it in.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Inaudible.]

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Man comes over to me, very well dressed, and says, "You're dipping." I said, "Excuse me?" He said, "I said, you're dipping." I said, "You know, I like to learn new words, and I'm gonna tell you the truth, I don't know what you're saying." He said, "I said, you're dipping." I said, "Is that two words, or one?" He said, "Dipping, dipping." I said, "Are you saying dipping?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "Is that what you call that?" And he says yeah, and I said, "Well, I did learn a new word. And the word is dipping." He said, "You say it your way, I'll say it mine." I said, "Fine." He said to me, "Do you know who does that down here, don't you?" I said, "No." He said, "The niggers." I said, "Excuse me?" He said, "I said, the niggers." I said, "Well, I'm going to learn two words from you." I had a fucking ring in his nose and I said, "Boy, you're gonna dance." And he said the word nigger 8,000 different ways. Right? And—uncomfortable, uncomfortable scene. But I'd seen one, I will not mention him, very famous American quadrillionaire standing in the corner, and he's just got a little grin on his face, and he's just kind of staying back. So, finally he said, "I'm talking about them people with black skins, and broad noses, and big lips, and kinky hair." I said, "You talking about African Americans?" He said, "You say it your way, and I'll say it mine." I said, "You know something, you will say it that way until you die, and I will say it the way I say it until I die, but thanks for the two new words." [00:06:00] Go to my mother, said, "I've called for my coat," my mother-in-law. So, we go out and she said, "I will never be invited back there." I said, "I'll tell you something, you tell them you're going to bring your son-in-law, they'll let you back every goddamn night of the week." She called me a number of months later. She said, "You were right." I said, "Why?" She said, "Those people couldn't keep their faces straight." I said, "They're very proper people, and did a very good job of it." She said, "They thought it was the most hysterical thing—they said, that man is a boor, a lout—a very wealthy one—a boor, a lout, and everything else." I said, "No shit, I noticed that." And she said, "So, I stand corrected." I said, "No, he stands corrected. But he's not correctable." So, I will not—I don't give a shit what the context is. I will not listen to it, won't put up with it. I was not reared that way, my children were not reared that way, I just won't put up with it. At all. It's evil, it's satanic, and it breeds hate, which compounds into more hate. More—I will not listen to it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You with your children and with your close friends, challenge intellectually, you believe that's part of growth, that's part of human intercourse?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Oh sure, oh sure.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The very opposite of the man you just spoke of.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Yeah, oh no, oh no, that's the spice of life. Banging your ideas against others, getting your ass kicked, kicking their ass, and so on. It's, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So, that's a, a very nice counterpart to your creative life, your opinions.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Absolutely, very, very closely enmeshed. Very closely enmeshed. So, I will not put for any motherfucker, a dogwood in the middle of my forest. [They laugh.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Guess there's not any here. [00:08:00]

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: No, there isn't—fortunately. There goes one temptation. One temptation, gone. Go ahead.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, I'll just ask you in passing, various people, aside from various artists you've talked about, that in the—you knew people like Rudy Burkhardt, the photographer, someone you got to know early on?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Oh, yes, very early on. Yeah, yeah. Edwin Denby, his friend, the dance critic, poet, writer. And, yeah, the whole goddamn crowd of people.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And you mention among the critics you like Hilton Kramer somewhat.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: I liked Hilton very much, I mean, I like his writing always.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was it about his writing that you think you like, or what first struck you?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Uh, I think the greatest writer of our time was Clem Greenberg. I think he really—no question about it. Uh, but Hilton has views, you can agree or not agree, but he does not bend them for anyone. He called me and said, "I want to come up and see you." I said, "Okay." He said, "I'm writing an article on Fairfield Porter, and you knew him well." I said, "No one knew him well." He said, "I know, but he spent time there." I said—[inaudible]. So, he comes up. My first three shows Hilton Kramer murdered me, I mean, in the *New York Times*, flayed me, stabbed me, shot me, brutalized me.

ROBERT F. BROWN: On what grounds?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: He didn't like the work. And anyway, he had other fish to fry, other people. And so, we're sitting on the porch talking about Fairfield, and he and I, by the way, I've never mentioned this. I said, "You know what you wrote about me one time?" He said, "What?" I said, "Well, you said, 'This man paints women in the woods. He's neither been with a woman nor in the woods.'" He said, "I didn't write that." [00:10:00] I said, "Want me to get it for you? Want to punch it up?" "I'll punch it up." I said, "That was the third time around, I got on the train in Philadelphia, picked up the *Times*, and there it was." And I said, "It pissed me off." And I got to New York, I went to the opening there, and I walk in, there are a lot of people there and all of a sudden, I see this tall figure, and it's Fairfield. And he walks over, takes me by the wrist, he says "Come in the office with me." And I go in, and I said, "What's up?" And he said, "You got a marvelous review today." And I said, "Where?" And he said, "*New York Times*, by Hilton Kramer." And I said, "Fairfield, don't fuck around with me, that's not funny." He would get very impatient, said, "You do not understand." I said, "Well, then enlighten me." He said, "It is our charge to make it so difficult they can't get it, and he didn't get it." I told Hilton that, he just laughed his ass off. He said, "That is Fairfield Porter." I said, "Yeah, that's Fairfield Porter." Then they had a show in New York where artists picked other artists. I picked someone, someone picked me, and they expected one of the big paintings, and I had done a portrait of Edwin—it's in my book—Edwin Denby, about this big. And I sent that, Hilton Kramer devoted the whole *Sunday Times* to that painting. And then all of a sudden, he supported me very strongly until he left. So, there's that kind of—that's not development, that's being bright enough to have an instant look at something and saying, "Ah, this man I hate has done that?"

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So, he sort of had an epiphany you might say? He came around, sort of a watershed. Greenberg, did you ever—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Oh, yeah. Oh sure, I met Clem, yeah. I'll tell you a very funny story. Because Todd Catlin, who used to be the director of the Yale Museum, wrote my last catalogue. And a marvelous guy, came here and stayed and we just had a marvelous time shooting the shit. [00:12:00] And he said—Clem Greenberg's widow had seen it and told him how much she liked it and everything. They were talking. And she said, "You know what he did one time to Clem?" He said, "No." Said, "There was a show of Barnett Newman's, and Neil was in there. And Clem supported that, right? And Neil was looking at a painting and Clem came up behind him, and said, 'What do you think of that?' I said, 'I think it's overworked.'" She said, "Clem laughed for a month." Nothing on it, right? Two colors and stripes. I said, "I think it's overworked." He, I found out subsequently from friends, he sold my work everywhere. Boston Museum, *da, da, da*. He supported me very strongly, and his professional persona was that of the reductive painters. I never knew it until quite late. I pissed the director, a guy named Ken Moffatt, I pissed him off so badly. I had a show in Boston at Horkus Krakow, and I went there, and there was Clem. Lots of people went [ph]. And Moffatt was an acolyte of his, right? And Clem placed those people around. And Moffatt being—said to me, "You've got to go to the museum," he said, "I've just hung a marvelous big Olitski show." I said, "You know it's always been my ambition of mine to hang a show of mine on an Olitski show," I said, "Let a little show around the edge, but." And he got pissed, man. He stormed out of there, and Clem was behind me, I mean, he was hysterical. Just laughing his ass off, right, but Moffatt wasn't and [00:14:00] became, I suppose, an archenemy, I've never taken the trouble to find out. Goddamn, was he mad.

ROBERT F. BROWN: No he—maybe that was the time he had you down on a panel at the Boston Museum, Moffatt had you down.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Yeah, about that time. I don't even remember it, I do remember it happened, but I don't remember it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. So, Clem was a rather broader and universal person than many of his acolytes.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Oh, oh, ho. Clem was big time, big time. I went, when I left—Johnny Myers went belly up, I said, I'll go talk to Clem. I mean I would see him, we'd talk, right? So, I went and made an appointment—so, I'm in New York, went into his apartment, he was looking like a goddamn street person, ragging around in old slippers, and so on. I said, "Clem, I have a problem. Johnny Myers has gone belly up, and I have to get a gallery." And I said, "What do you think of X?" "They won't look at you." "Wildenstein, what about that?" "They won't touch you." "That?" "They might, but then you'd have to think about what you're getting into." And so finally I said to him, uh, "Marlborough." "Too many painters, you'd just become one of a crowd there." I said, "Okay, that's all I wanted to hear from you." And I went with Fischbach and then I subsequently went with Marlborough, and I saw Clem there one time I was having a show there. And he came up to me and said, "You didn't take my advice." [Laughs.] And I said, it was very funny, I said, "I waited a long time, though, to consider it," and he said, "You're crazy." Laughed, and off he went. I liked him a great deal. I was never close with him, I don't mean to imply that, but certainly admired him.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You said people couldn't get close to Fairfield Porter, but you did.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: No. I did not, I did not, nobody did. [00:16:00] Nobody did. Fairfield came here one time, he would come every summer for about a week after he left his island, he'd come here, and he'd paint here.

ROBERT F. BROWN: He summered at an island—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Huge, Great Spruce Head. So, I would never let him in the studio. I worked here, I'd come out, close the door. Or if I worked in the woods, I'd come back, and put my paintings in the shed, and so on. So, one day, the door was slightly ajar, and Fairfield's out here. I said, "You want to go in there Fairfield?" He said, "Very much." Fairfield and I both went through analysis, psychoanalysis. I, old-time didactic, not in crisis, he for whatever his reasons were. And so he walks in, he walks directly across there, he looks up into the loft, he said, "Analysis doesn't change anything, it only analyzes it." I said, "Fairfield, you're wrong." "In what way am I wrong?" I said, "It teaches you not to lie to yourself, and hence not to lie to other people." He said, "That's brilliant." I said, "It's not brilliant, you knew that, but you wanted to make it so fucking obtuse that nobody could understand what you were saying." Turns around, there's a painting. "What's that?" I said, "What the hell's it look like? It's a painting." He said, "But it's all finished above, there's nothing below." I said, "That's the way I work, Fairfield." He said, "That can't be done." I said, "But Fair—" "I know you're doing it, but it can't be done." Walks up and he looks at the painting. He said, "Why do you do it?" I said, "I'll tell you if you promise never to tell anyone." And he gets very serious, said he wouldn't divulge it anyone, for any reason. I said, "When I reach the floor, I'm finished. And you're still fucking around up in the sky trying to decide what you're going to change." He laughed and laughed and laughed his ass off. [00:18:00] And he was a hard guy to get to laugh at his own expense. He just roared and laughed about that. I had great affection for him, great affection for him.

I was a pallbearer at his funeral, God help us all. He was so funny, he spoke always in non-sequiturs, right? Always. And at the end of the day, when he and I had finished, here he said we'll take a walk. And the walk consisted often of five miles at least, straight up, straight down, and he was a big man at a very fast clip. I walk fast too, so it was—it wasn't any trouble. We're walking, we're going down to the woods there, and all of a sudden from the back he said, "You use too much green in your paintings." I stop, I don't even look, I said, "Fairfield, that's the dumbest thing I've ever heard you say." "And why?" I said, "There's green above." And he looks, there was green above, he looks. Said, "There's green to the left, green to the right, green in the front, green in the back. Green on the ground." And then I just walk on, no comment. Come through—walk another 15 minutes, and all of a sudden, he says, "Yes, you probably use too little green in your paintings." Then he comes in, we come in, and that's after he's come through—come to the studio. And there lies a big watercolor thrown in the corner, right? He said, "What's that?" I said, "It's a watercolor." "Why's it there?" I said, "I lost it." He said, "Watercolor is not like oil." He said, "Watercolor can be worked over, and over and over, and over, and oil must be put down and left." Absolute opposite—

ROBERT F. BROWN: —of the convention. [00:20:00]

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: He's right, he's right. He never fucking did it, he—his watercolors look like he made them in 10 minutes. He never did it, but he knew it. And he's right. But as Franz Kline said, being right is a terrific state of mind in which nobody is interested. [They laugh.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: So Porter was a pretty profound guy.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Harvard guy. Who went to the Soviet Union like Dos Passos and Cummings and those guys, but not so much as convinced, but to look at it. And came back and became wildly conservative guy. Not right wing, but conservative, right? And he just thought that was the sewer of the universe. Have you read the Rokoganoff [ph] books? He was the Russian keeper of the archives. He has three books out, Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin, don't miss them. I read Remnick's *Lenin's Tomb* too, and there is a part in, I'm almost—I was reading two of them, and there's a part in there where Ligachev [ph], I think, goes to Molotov after Stalin's death and says, "We have to face it," he says, "Stalin was excessive." Molotov said, "Compared to Lenin, Stalin was a lamb." I went out, I bought goddamn Lenin books until—[inaudible]—they were empty. I'd do a tome in two nights, right? There was nothing in there. All of a sudden, I read this thing about Rokoganoff [ph] is coming out with these books, he was the keeper of the archives, and in fact got through it, with his skin. Jesus Christ man, everything we think, and this is—he's recording it. It was a thousand times worse. [00:22:00] They murdered people like we swat black flies. Friends. Man, just mind-boggling paranoia, Stalin was paranoid beyond belief and he says, Stalin learned it from Lenin. Lenin was a goddamn universal piece of shit, right? And Trotsky—all my Jewish friends say but Trotsky, but I said, Trotsky was a bigger piece of shit. He went up and shot those goddamn sailors down like they were dogs. And what'd he get? A fucking ice pick in his head in return for it. My God, they're important books. Don't miss them, because then all the bullshit you hear about that stuff collapses, because this is out of the—[inaudible]—he has, he went right into the fucking Lenin archives. And they're rich, right?

ROBERT F. BROWN: These are things that matter a lot to you, these are revelations? These abuse—well, disabuse you—?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: I'm a second—I'm a second World War freak. I'll tell you where they were, how far they marched, who got killed, how many got killed—[inaudible]—just the way it is. You know, I've read it all thrice.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And why do you suppose you are so interested in that time?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Because I grew up then, and that's when I was doing my crazy reading, right? I read the newspaper from cover to cover every night, everything. And the Russian thing has always been a mystery, and the literature filled with fucking lies, usually by left wing American writers. And all of sudden, the thing's "bared" as they say in the crosswords. Aired—aired or bared, take your choice.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Audio break.] Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Political involvement and the revelations of these new writings from the Russian archives, but your own political involvements, have they been overt over the years, or just periodic? I know you've taken very strong stands on things that have affected you here in Maine, for example.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Yeah, those things are extra-political, I'm talking about big issues, right? Those I'm into whenever they happen. [00:24:00] Uh, when I was in Philadelphia I played folk music, hung around, some of them were card-carrying guys and so on. And uh, fucking bullshit, right. Masturbatory crap.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you played music. You played—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: I played music with them, but I didn't give a shit about their politics, they talked about it all the time. And so, I would say in many ways I'm apolitical, don't give a shit about it. I would vote for a Republican under duress, but only then.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, yeah. You know, one of your good friends, you described to me as your adversarial friend, is John Silber, the chairman now, I think, but longtime president of Boston University. And here's a man who is very strong and outspoken and—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Very conservative.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —very conservative. And in what sense of conservative? You described a moment ago—

[Cross talk.]

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Not politically, Fairfield Porter was much to the right of John Silber, no. I think, despite the fact he ran for Governor, I think those people do not like politics and what it breeds. And so, they end up being very conservative about it, you know, it's fucking bullshit, right? I find—I've said this to John, "I've found in your case, John, that you think, when the Democrats do this bullshit, when the Republicans do it you don't comment." And so, he gives me a lot of shit about that, right? So, a very conservative guy. I would say to you that, in the serious sense I'm more conservative than either of them. Not talking about social programs, not talking about anything of the kind, I'm talking about conserving. I believe in conserving, conserving the landscape, conservation—fucking conservatives don't give a shit about the landscape.

ROBERT F. BROWN: No.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: No. That's my conservatism.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Fundamental.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Absolutely, elemental, fundamental. And, uh—[00:26:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Does that go back, do you suppose, to your childhood even? Were you always, as you look back—

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: I have a very good idea of the Earth, where it is, what it is, as much is known out there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Is it a matter do you think of uh, our, comparing it to being stewards of the Earth?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: No, we're not stewards of the Earth, we're rapists of the Earth. And the big rollers, and the corps, and so on, they don't give a shit about anything. They don't care if it lasts a week. That rubs me in the sorest ways.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So yours is something else, yours is conserving what, these particular surroundings here, for example? Well obviously, there's something here.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Well, you can only conserve so much. But they have the money and they attack things in a big way and so then you have to attack them from your sniper's nest. I'm going to read you something, can you stand it?

[Audio break.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: What is your conservatism, somewhat related though to um, the woods and the conservation?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Absolutely.

ROBERT F. BROWN: I mean, you've run this place according to what became known as an organic principle, right?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Totally.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Fuel, energy, what you eat and so forth.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Absolutely, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And this was affected you said earlier, by some reading you'd done, reading very early, I think.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: The gardening thing, I think, Ruth Stout. *How to Garden Without an Aching Back*.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.] Likewise, now, the last 15 years you've been going periodically, you have a place in western Ireland.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: It's my burnout place, when I'm absolutely at the end of the rope, you know, can't lift my legs, exhausted, we just get on a plane, fly to Shannon, go down to our place. Go to the pub, sit in the house.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you like that place for somewhat the same reasons you like it here? [00:28:00]

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Absolutely. By the way, it's the closest place in Europe to Maine, the Dingle Peninsula.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The Dingle Peninsula.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Which I'm told at the drop of a hat there. And I do not work there. And that's for me a trick, I read heavily. I met some Irish painters who knew who I was and were very interested in why a painter would come there. And they said to me, "Are you going to paint here?" I said, "No." They said, "Why not?" I said, "It's too green." [Laughs.] It's the greenest goddamn place I've ever seen in my life. Bizarre, the green.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What you said earlier though, you have to keep on a roll, I guess one could use that word, in your creative life. How do you—you put that aside however, when you go to Dingle?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Absolutely, yeah. It's a break. I think painting there all day, but I don't think it looking out the window, because I look out the window and say, I never want to paint this. Right?

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you think painting, your thought about the process continues.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Oh, yeah. We're going to go after my next show because I'm tired out because of all this traveling and painting.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Your next show is where?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Uh, Marlborough. New York, yeah, in February and we'll go shortly after that. And I'll take a couple prints with me because we're going to stay a while and do breakdowns, and that sort of thing. I'll have them ready by the time I go there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Are prints an adjunct, or do you see them as an equal?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: You know, when this print show came together, someone came up to me and said, "I didn't know you had done this many prints," I said, "I didn't know it either." And someone asked me about it, and I said, "I looked, and I found 60 prints. In the drawers." Plus, another 80 or 100 that burned in the house, plates, proofs, and everything. So yeah, and they said, "Do you do it all the time?" I said, "No." And "Why do you do it?" [Inaudible.] And I said, [00:30:00]"You know, next to me was a man who had a blueberry barren and he lived from that, big one." And he harvested it, and burned it, took care of it and everything. And every once in a while, he'd disappear. He lived close by, but said—every once in a while, in the winter I'd be going down, I'd look down in the strip between his land and the road, and I would see him cutting white birch, which was then a very valuable tree, spools, little machine parts. And so I went by and said, "Bill what are you doing down there?" He said, "Winter knitting." I said, "So, prints are my [ph] dear sweetheart, now—

[Audio break.]

—giving me an honorary doctorate this year. And then they tell me that I'm going to address the graduation. Huge number of people. So, I go down there, and I do this, I'll just have to ad lib the top of this.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This is your remarks.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Yes. Uh, I want to beg your forbearance for a minute and begin this talk, you will understand why, with a poem from Gerard Manley Hopkins circa 1870. This is the poem: I said, So lament at the loss of some woods, my aspen is dear whose airy cage is quelled, quelled or quenched in leaves, the leaping sun all felled, felled, are all felled, of a fresh and fallowing folded rank. Not spared not one that dandled a sandled shadow, that swam or sank on meadow and river, and wind wandering weed winding bank. Or if we but knew what we do, when we delve or hew, hack and rack the growing green, since country is so tender to touch or being so slender that, like this sleek and seeing ball, but a prick will make no eye at all. Where we, even where we mean to mend her, we end her, when we hew or delve. Aftercomers cannot guess the beauty been, 10 or 12, only 10 or 12 strokes of havoc unselfe, especial scene, rural scene, a rural scene, sweet especial rural scene. Then, this is last night as I was trying to think of the shortest and best address of this sort I'd ever heard of, years ago, an organization in New Haven, which was studying and opposed to the use of alcohol, had a national conference. Wilbur Cross, the retired much beloved governor of Connecticut, was asked to deliver the opening address. He began by saying that as he aged, he discovered he was tired by lunchtime, and on someone's recommendation, had a whiskey highball with lunch, which rejuvenated him. He then discovered that another of the same drink before dinner extended his day, and he need not go to bed directly after dinner. Finally, he said, that though he had been a public figure, occasions of this sort made him nervous. So, he'd found that a highball just before leaving to give a public address relaxed him and his address could be delivered with less anxiety. Having said all this, he was finished and sat down.

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.]

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: The invasion of one's private—riding from the airport, Professor Drubin [ph] told me I was to speak today, and that I had been written to that effect. I was not surprised by this, as I do not read my mail. A habit which began years ago, when I realized my name was not boxholder, or occupant. The invasion of one's privacy through the mail is an example of that which will I will address for your perusal. First, a word or two about living as an artist. Without dwelling too long on the particularities of living as an artist, I will say there are two factors which separate painting from other pursuits. [00:34:00] For example, it is an entirely useless activity, not applicable to anything. And secondly, it does not progress. There are a multitude of extraordinarily serious problems facing us as a society today from health to housing, painting addresses none. In fact, the attraction of the discipline, is its lack of usefulness. It relieves one of the pressures of need in order to devote life to the disentangling of perceptual data. To dispense of the second factor, I am simply postulating that: whether the great and ancient images dotting the caves of Europe and the Sistine Chapel are subject to comparison is of course ludicrous. Having confessed that I have spent my life in a useless activity which does not progress, I should like to examine for you a problem that must be addressed in particular by your generation, if we are to continue as a species. Back to the mail I do not read. The mail is not only an intrusion on my privacy, it is much

more importantly an intrusion on your planet. It represents thousands of trees, thousands of acres of land denuded to produce a product which will tell me of another product I do not need or want. To tap one fossil fuel resources to drive the machinery to produce the object I do not need or want, pollutes the air I must breathe. The residual waste from the production of that I do not need or want will enter an aquifer from which I must drink. Having received the literature describing that which I do not need, I must dispose of that literature in a landfill in a swamp, which I would much prefer to look at and unsnarl perceptually. We have as a people been involved in processes of this sort since the dawn of the industrial revolution. Most of this has been carried out in the name of progress and profit. With the opening of Eastern Europe, we've discovered our adversaries have been doing the same thing with, unbelievably, even less concern for the results than we. [00:36:00] We have wantonly scarred, laid open, and covered this planet with the great fungus of progress. We began with the ruthless genocidal destruction of the great Native American cultures, for whom that which we are doing was the consummate stupidity. It is to you, alas, we pass this spaceship, and it is for my generation an embarrassment that it's been so carelessly used. It is for you to restore it with affection, for it is not only beautiful and majestic, it's all we have. I do not wish to leave you with the blackest pessimism, for I love being here, and I want my children to love being here, and these pernicious habits must be broken by you, and you must do it by becoming aware of those processes which have created the situation. Finally, you must endure this stridency, and the hostility of those who will cover you with derision because they want to continue in the same way in the name of progress. You must simply explain to them that it is possible to have a planet without an economy, but it is not possible to have an economy without a planet. Now I'll leave you with a verse of an old Southern song, and close: Daddy won't you take me back to Muhlenberg County? Down by the Green River where paradise lay. I'm sorry my son, but you're too late in asking. Mister Peabody's coal train has hauled it away. I finished, I went down, fucking people were wild, this was not what they expected, right?

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Laughs.]

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: And a guy comes up to me, he says, "We were just stunned." And I said, "Wasn't so hot, huh?" He said, "Genius." I said, "No, no it's not." He said, "I belong to an organization, and we are conservationists, and we're doing work in Maine, and could we stop and see you?" [00:38:00] I said, "Absolutely." And he said, "I'll send you our literature." So, he sends me a book, The Christian Brothers Fellowship. I read it, they are doing—they are interested in conservation, with heavy loads of Jesus between the lines. So, he calls me, and says, "Did you read it?" I said, "I read it. And you are doing good work, and I'm very pleased about it," and so on. He said, "We'd like you to join our organization." I said, "I can't." He said, "Why not?" I said, "I'm not a Christian." He was stunned. He said, "Well, I'm going to continue to send you the paper—" I said, "Please do." Because there was a lot of stuff I liked. I'm born, bred, reared a Christian, but I am not a Christian. Jesus Christ almighty, he was so upset, but people were just wild about that. At the end, the applause went on, and on, the students stood up, and whistling, and *whoo!* Isn't that funny? So, that's a good statement about what I think about that which we just discussed.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yes, yeah, excellent. Do you feel there is some hope?

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: I think it's a very, very treacherous time. It's a very treacherous time. Because that which I just said there with the greatest simplicity is known by almost no one. Except the Sierra Club, and the few conservationists, people don't know it. They don't feel it, they don't touch it, they don't smell it. Someone asked me once here, "Why did you bring your kids here?" I said, "I wanted my kids to understand that everything does not come out of a box." Only that. Here, we'll make the food, we'll *da, da, da, da, da, da*. And that's why I'm here. That was a very critical factor. But Jesus Christ, you feel like you're shouting into a vacuum. [00:40:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Are your children, though, are, are among your creations, and you talked earlier, they're going creatively—and that's partly owing, perhaps, to their having been involved in process their whole life.

NEIL GAVIN WELLIVER: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. I don't have close contact with my children at all. Because I figure, what's done I did, they saw it by example, and then, God bless them. But they are not mean. They are not mean-spirited, they are—they're a really, really nice bunch of people. That's all you can ask for.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]