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Oral history interview with Alfred Leslie, 2019 April 17

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Contact Information
Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington. D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/services/questions
www.aaa.si.edu/

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Alfred Leslie on April 17, 2019. The interview took place in New York, New York and was conducted by Liza Zapol for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Liza Zapol has reviewed the transcript. Her corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. 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

ALFRED LESLIE: I've always tried to stick with what I actually think I did and where I've tried to recover everything after the fire, because all my record-keeping began immediately after my studio burned down. I probably commented on this in the earlier tape, in which, as I watched the fire and as I watched this self-portrait that had just been in the Whitney, which I had standing near enough to a window, because I loved to see it from the street. And you know the location of the building— [bell rings, brief interruption.]

[END OF TRACK leslie19_2of2_digrec_track01.]

LIZA ZAPOL: Please say your name and your—

ALFRED LESLIE: Alfred Leslie, [. . . –Ed.]

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.] This is Liza Zapol interviewing for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Oral History Project. It's April 17, 2019, one o'clock or so in the afternoon, and we're here in the East Village, and if I can ask you again to say your name. [. . . –Ed.]

ALFRED LESLIE: Alfred Leslie, L-E-S-L-I-E.

LIZA ZAPOL: Thank you, Alfred. You were saying, as we were starting to record before, that —as you were watching the fire, and then you were about to elaborate about it.

ALFRED LESLIE: Oh, right, yeah. I had been just nominally saving things, not thinking specifically about anything called an archive or anything. Outside of protecting my work physically, not anything. But I saved everything that I made. During the fire, as I realized everything was disappearing, I realized that—I found myself saying, rather, that I was going to be living, from then on, two lives at the same time. The first would be doing my new work and dealing with issues, daily life issues. And the other, recovering the evidence of lost works.

The problems that came up about recovering the lost works partially had to do with my having to ask people about information about things. [00:02:17] And sometimes, just by my asking them, an element of resentment that I never even suspected was there sort of appeared. The best example of this that I can think of has to do—once, when I was at an opening at the Marlborough Gallery. After the fire, I realized that I needed to go as many places as I could, every night, and as soon as possible come in contact with everyone that I knew, so they could get over seeing me that first time. So whatever it was, however they were going to respond to it, would be over with and we could move on. Because people have different ways of responding to this. One guy, I remember— [Brief interruption.]

LIZA ZAPOL: One guy—

ALFRED LESLIE: Yeah—at the Five Spot, when I said, "How are you doing?" so forth and so on, said he had gotten a letter from Tom Hess, Dick Bellamy, and Bob Staub [ph], who were friends of mine who had formed a comfortable relationship for the moment in order to try to raise money for me. This guy just took a five-dollar bill and threw it on the floor, and it was kind of crazy. [00:04:06] And other people said, "This is the end of an era." There were all kinds of odd things that came up.

At Marlborough, at the show that I was at, I was standing with—I think it was—I don't remember whose opening it was, but I was standing with Bill de Kooning and Philip Guston and Ibram Lassaw. I think it was the three of them. And Rothko appeared. And Rothko always, as I knew him, was his own person and liked to be the center of everything, like a lot of people like to be. But since I was there and they were commiserating with me—the three of these guys, or four of them, about what had happened to me—Mark was sort of left off on the boundary. And it made him obviously uncomfortable. He said, "Well, I see our little genius is having problems."

So this is the extreme that one could go to. Someone like de Kooning, who gave me $250, whereas—Rockefeller, Nelson Rockefeller, gave me $100. Bill wrote me a long letter. People wrote me letters from all over the country. Unexpectedly, people that I didn't know telling me they understood what was happening, and what had happened to me.

I covered some of this in those videos that I made on my website. [00:06:01] None of it is exaggerated. All of it tells things that actually happened, but sometimes I framed it in a way that it was made for easier access, like when I did the one, for example, when I was talking about Barney Newman, his wife, giving me an umbrella. [Laughs.] I don't know if you saw that. Then I had a picture of bombs falling down from the sky. Patsy Southgate, who was at that time married to Mike Goldberg, gave me a typewriter. Other people, as I say, sent me money and letters. The painter Peter Leventhal came and worked with me to help start up my new studio for free, for a week. So there were these accidental moments that happened of people stepping forward, but it was very, very complicated.

And that's continued. The issue of confronting all of these issues continued for just about exactly 20 years. During that time, I began gathering as much information as I could about the evidences of what I had done. Because frequently—as I am even to this day challenged by people who say, "Did you really do that?," like I'm expecting when these things are eventually seen by some of these Hoboken—the surrogates for *Hoboken Oval*, people will say, "Did you really do that?" Because they relate from that period, and the date of these—which I started making them in 1952, when I did the *Hoboken Oval* for that play of Parker Tyler's, *The Screen*—will say that it's an invention of mine. [00:08:12]

And also because the photographer who took pictures of the play at that time, Walter Silver, was a deeply depressed person. Very gifted photographer, but deeply depressed. He had photographs of everything I had ever done, besides Rudy Burckhardt. Rudy photographed, nominally speaking, my paintings. And there was a German photographer—I've forgotten his name—who was a friend of Rudy's for a while, in 1950, who photographed my sculpture. But Walter was living with Grace Hartigan at the time after we separated. And he was the one who, because of his relationship to Grace, became very friendly with the people at Tibor de Nagy Gallery, so was always photographing all of their events. He was, as I say, so depressed that as the issues of protecting his archive of photographs came up, there were a lot of problems.

At one point, his apartment was broken into, and whoever broke into there couldn't find anything, but whatever they picked up and was looked at, if it didn't have any value to them, they simply pitched out of the window, and it went down in an air shaft in the building. Including photographs of the stage sets that I did at Lake Hopatcong, New Jersey, and the sets that I did for the Parker Tyler play. [00:10:09] So those were pieces of evidence that I needed as confirmation to deal with the—I don't want to call them attacks, because of the way that people treated you, thinking you were trying to inflate yourself.

I had written, in 1957 or so, something called *The Chekov Cha-Cha*. What *The Chekov Cha-Cha* was was kind of a text that was actually a fictionalized version of my unsympathetic feelings and ideas about people who regarded being an artist as a career. I was railing, throughout the whole thing, against careerism. [Laughs.] It was a foolish name, title, I gave it. Careerists, you know. People thought it was just something—well, they should do it, and get into it, and make a living at it. I thought it was more like a calling, something that you just did, and you dealt with all the consequences of a choice like that.

I gave it to my girlfriend at the time, Diana Powell, who had been working in the office of Barney Rosset's Grove Press and asked her if she could type it up for me a little better than I did. Somehow it found its way into, I think, Jimmy Schuyler's hands—the poet, Jimmy Schuyler—and Jimmy loved it and gave it to John Ashbery. [00:12:06] John Ashbery, with someone else, was publishing a new literary magazine in England—I think he was living in

France at one point, in the middle '50s—called *Art and Literature*. It was featured as the first article, the first piece of literature, in the first issue.

But at that time, I was married to this woman, Lisa Bigelow, who had three children by a former marriage, and her husband was always challenging her to try to take away her children from her. And I realized that the publication of this might—if there was any kind of legal issues that came up, any kind of courtroom drama—that this would be very provocative, and be unhelpful and work against her. Because it portrayed me—the character, sort of—as very reckless, so forth and so on. Not a good person to be the father of three children: one five, one seven, and one nine. Incredible, wonderful, wonderful kids.

So at any rate, the magazine—let me think now. I think the magazine—I think it either—I think—I never gave—they never published it, because I told John I didn't want them to print it. But he had a copy of the text besides the text that I had. My copy of the text was destroyed. [00:14:02] When I tried to recover the text from the young woman who had taken over the handling of all those kinds of issues, of preserving the archive of the magazine, she turned out to be someone who was constantly moving from one place to another. Over the period of two or three years, I tried to reach her, and always found that she was moving from one place to another. Finally, I think, I believe, I did reach her, and she told me that she had left the archive of the magazine with a friend, and now she didn't know how to get in touch with them.

So someday, I figure, it will turn up, in the way that the only example of the sculptures that I made is in a photograph that I have on the wall over behind me, which only last year appeared out of the blue when the widow of this photographer sent me a series of photographs and asked me if I could identify the people in them. I was able to, and this photograph was one of them. So it showed me making one of these early sculptures of mine. I believe it was at the place that came to be known as Studio 35, which I mentioned in the early tape.

So it was at that time, at the fire, that I realized I had to accumulate all this material, bring it all together, and try to reconstruct the chronology of my work. By—I think it was about 19, maybe, '69, or something like that—I don't remember the exact year—I wrote to Yaddo and I asked if I could spend some time there during the winter. [00:16:15] My idea was to bring up all of the papers that I had accumulated, plus my tape recorder, and record something. I would go through the papers and write something. Still, I'm a one-finger typist, so it was something of a challenge, but the way that I did it, they gave me—I went up in the winter the first year, and it was marvelous, because the place gets snowed in. I don't know if you've ever been there.

They gave me a cottage off by myself, because the first place they gave me was in a building that had a number of different artists and different studios, and after I had written something, I would spend all day typing. At the end of the day—I had set up, like, a little sound studio, much as we have here now. And I would sit down, and I would read out loud everything that I had just written for the day into my tape recorder. Then I would have a—whatever you call it—a small cassette of it. I would go down in my truck, put the cassette in the truck, and go for a drive and listen to it. Every time I hesitated in my reading, I realized that was a place I was unsure [laughs] about the character of of the writing itself. [00:18:02] Not in terms—not of the content, but the way it was written. That's how I made corrections in it.

I was there for, I think, the entire winter. I think I was there for three months. I came back, and then a young artist listened to all the stuff that I had recorded and typed it all out. Then I used elements in that, in different versions and in different ways, not only to understand my chronology, but to create some of the works that you saw on my website. So that's what I had to go through in order to reconstruct everything that I'm telling you about now.

I still do it on a daily basis. For example, when I had finished making this painting that was called *Hoboken Oval* that I mentioned before, I was unable—I was living at Hoboken at the time, 22 Hudson Place, and I was unable to go in my pickup truck to the theater, which is on, I think, Thompson Street. I think it was the Cherry Lane Theater. I was unable to pick it up, so I asked them to deliver it to Grace Hartigan's studio, where we had lived together. We had established a studio at 25, I think it was—I think on Essex—the corner of Essex and Hester Street. A tiny little two-story building that is still there. Across the street was Guss' Pickles. Next to it, a bakery, and downstairs there was a dairy, a grocery store or something.

[00:20:00]

When the six panels of the *Hoboken Oval*, which were painted on Masonite, arrived there, either in a fit of resentment, or just backwardness—I don't know how it happened—he decided that he could use the panels of Masonite, the six of them, to do some construction work in the hall. There was an open staircase that came up to the top floor, and I think he cut the panels up and used them in the wall. It's very possible that they are still there.

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

ALFRED LESLIE: So that was when—years later, I tried to get the photographs of this from Walter. It was kind of something that was very difficult to deal with, but it wasn't unusual, because of all of the issues that come up.

And as I say, I can't emphasize enough the frequent issue of someone confronting you and saying you are distorting your history. Most recently, it happened when I was preparing a catalog for a show that I had with Tim Hill in—I forget where his gallery is, in the Middle West somewhere. He was preparing a beautiful catalog. So there was a photograph that had been taken of me by a man named John Reed, John R-E-E-D. [00:22:03] Not the guy who went and is buried in the Kremlin, the American, the Communist, but just a man named John Reed who was a student at New York University the same time I was. He and his wife, Phyllis, had moved into the loft underneath Grace and myself.

At one point, John had been—John was the person who, when I was—I think I had mentioned in the earlier tape how I sold everything that I owned in order to clear my way and confront the issues involving my life as a painter and my dedication, if you want to call it that. It sounds a little presumptuous, a little pretentious. He was the one who bought all my photographic equipment. In his obituary, in the *East Hampton Star*—because after he and Phyllis moved out of Essex and Hester Street, they moved to East Hampton, which was like a beautiful little pastoral, rural fishing place. It was really lovely at the time. He opened up a photography store, and in his obituary he said that I had been a filmmaker and a photographer and he had been a painter, and he bought all of my equipment and then I became a painter and he became a photographer. It was a distortion, because I had been both, always, at the same time. [00:24:00]

But he took this picture of me. That's—I want to get back to this. He took this picture of me, sitting in my studio, sort of dramatically, on a chair in front of these big, high windows. You know, that kind of picture that photographers often make of artists, or anybody does. And on the side wall was a painting of mine called *Orange and Black*, or *Black and Orange*, from 1948 and 1949. Now, Tim Hill wanted to use it in the catalog. And he wanted to use, also, three other photographs that Walter had taken later on. Photographs of me that he took in my 940 Broadway studio, of me in front of paintings that I made, actually, that managed to survive the fire because I had sent them to storage. So I had color shots of those paintings. And I did—in the shots that he took of 940 Broadway, I took the color images, I cut them out, and I pasted them on top of Walter's black-and-whites. So for the catalog—I can give you a catalog, I think I can find it easily—you see me in the studio, at 940 Broadway, the black-and-white photograph, but wherever there's a painting of mine, it's in color.

Well, I did the same thing with this picture that John Reed took of me at Essex and Hester Street. Three or four years ago, after Tim Hill produced the catalog and published this picture that John Reed took at East Broadway, I had also, for the black-and-white picture, pasted in the painting that was sticking out, showing on the left side. [00:26:12] Two people—two people!—in the museum life said they thought it was a fake, that I had put in the picture a painting that I could not have done at the time.

The reason was, if you examine the kinds of paintings that came to be known as post-war American painting, and Abstract Expressionism, all the rest of it, it is so different from all the others in terms of its handling. Many of the painters who were part of my generation, their work—say, in 1948 and 1949—still had the echoes of French easel painting. This is not a qualification I'm making, good or bad. Hardly. Not at all. But the pictures that I was making at the time, like the ones that are in my first show from 1952—and this picture, *Black and Orange*, which I had pasted that color image in of it—did not look like any of the other works of artists that I knew or who were in my gallery. Helen Frankenthaler at the time, Larry Rivers at the time, Bob Goodnough at the time, Jane Freilicher at the time—all of them were still involved in an area of pictorialism and easel painting, in which it was clear that, in that

painting, even though it was a small painting, it was bigger than most of what was called easel paintings. [00:28:23] Luckily, that picture survived, and Tim sold it to someone in the middle—I guess in Texas or something like that.

But these were challenges that came up. And as I say, the most recent example of that was this thing that came up with Tim. And of course, when I asked him to tell me who this fucking idiot was that would say something like that, he wouldn't tell me. I don't blame him. But at the same time, I thought it was kind of pissy that someone in that position, who obviously knew so little about my background, could make such a tawdry and backward comment like that. Plus the fact it's terrible when someone thinks that you're lying about something like this. I thought it was so awful.

Anyway, those were the issues that came up when I was writing after the fire on that first trip to Yaddo. A way of trying to deal with the way I was being redefined by the successive generation of curators and painters. As I mentioned earlier, people who were in successive generations, who knew nothing about my work, were then thinking—they would make comments like, "Oh, he was an abstract painter up until the time his studio burned down, and then suddenly, overnight, he became a realist artist." [00:30:11] It couldn't be further from the truth.

And when I was making—this gets into the issue of the—I think we could segue into the issue of the transition of my work. As I mentioned earlier, it all had to do—everything that happened to me was basically the result of my always trying to figure out how to reconcile who I was as an artist and as a person, what I brought to the table as an 18-, 19-year-old, when I met all of these older artists. What did I bring to the table? Since my first thought was to eliminate it all, I found that I never really did. All I did [laughs] was stop talking about it.

In every studio that I had, from the time that I left Essex and Hester Street—the first studio I got when I moved from there after Grace and I separated was on East Fourth Street. You know what was the first thing I did there? The place that the man who owned the building said, "You can use this side room as a bedroom." I turned that into a darkroom. [Laughs.] It was crazy. It was absolutely crazy. And then I continued to make photographs, plan on making films, everything that I had done before, except that I did not talk about it in general. Yet everyone knew that I was doing it. [00:32:08] So when I married Esta Teich—who eventually married Hilton Kramer—and I moved from this place on East Fourth Street to Hoboken, 22 Hudson Place, I built a darkroom there. Every place that I had gone to, short of this place here, I had built a darkroom. And it was crazy.

And at one point, when I was undergoing this transition, it came about because, as I said, I needed to—I was always in the position of trying to reconcile all of this stuff. Well, in 1956, I was making all of the so-called abstract paintings, as they were, but thinking about making films, writing films, doing all of this stuff that I had done before, but not trying to push it out into the world. When—I don't know if I mentioned this—but stop me—in the other thing—this young woman came to the studio with this man, an investor. Nice guy, younger than I was, actually. But he had made a lot of money. Did I tell this story?

LIZA ZAPOL: I think so. In terms of—but please go on. It's part of the through line. It's okay.

ALFRED LESLIE: He made all this money in Polaroid stock, and wanted to buy these collages of mine, 10 of them. I told him I would only sell him one. He gave me, as a gift, a Polaroid Land Camera. This was 1956. I was living with Diana Powell at the time. [00:34:00] Where were we living? Ah! We were living at 36 Third Avenue, which is right around the corner. It was in a loft that I had sublet from a sculptor, whose name I'll remember in about 15 minutes. [Laughs.] But I had sublet this loft, and Diana and I lived there. That's where I started to take those first Polaroids—no. No, that's not right. Let me think. No.

All of this whole transaction took place at 108 Fourth Avenue, where I shot *Pull My Daisy*. Yeah. That's where Diana and I moved when I had to give up 36 Third Avenue. I only was able to sublet that place—Leon Polanski [ph]. I sublet 36 Third Avenue from Leon Polanski [ph]. When the lease was up, Leon took the place over. Diana and I went to East Hampton. Maybe I mentioned this before. The occasion of going to East Hampton came about because the painter Wilfrid Zogbaum, who had been living there all of his life—or a good part of his life after he came out of the military, I believe—had a house on Fireplace Road, and he had bought two or three acres behind his house, and had bought a small barn and had it moved onto the property in the back.

When he was installing a stove, a gas stove, it blew up, and he was in the hospital. He called me up from the hospital and asked me and Diana if we were—when he heard that we were losing that place at 36 Third Avenue—if we came out, we could have the place—I forget, even for the most nominal fee imaginable. [00:36:18] All he needed was someone to live in that new place, in the back, to take care of it, so if someone was on the property—so Diana and I moved out there and stayed there for the winter, and I worked there. One of my neighbors was—I'm forgetting this guy's name; it'll come to me—was one of the artists who lived year-round in East Hampton, and was one of the artists, along with Alfonso Ossorio, who helped establish Sigma Gallery, that first gallery in East Hampton, where there were shows for the first time.

At that time, Joe Termini—I believe it was at that period, or maybe it was the year after, that Joe Termini, who was having great success with the Five Spot Café, having moved from its first location on Third Avenue to the corner of Saint Mark's Place, across the street from the Dom—Joe opened a place in Water Mill, where whenever Diana and I had no money, we would go over and Joe would feed us. Sometimes I would help him out by waiting on the tables or something like that. [00:38:00]

But it was a very tight-knit community. There were hardly any people there outside of the people who lived there year-round, the fisher folk and the artists who had been living there, like the great anatomist who taught anatomy at the Art Students League for years. He and his wife had been longtime residents in East Hampton. It was kind of like an enclave that had existed in the '20s in Provincetown. They had moved to East Hampton. It was a beautiful community.

Alfonso, for example, who came from a wealthy Filipino family, I believe—owned a lot of sugar plantations—bought a phenomenal group of property, just before you got into East Hampton, that had been the studio of a very well-known mural artist at the time. Had a huge studio, had a beautiful pond. I think part of it was Georgica Pond, where Alfonso and the guy he was living with, who was a dancer—name will come to me in a little while—they had swans in the back. He would often feed Diana and I when we didn't have any money. We would just stop by, and he would [laughs] give us a can of beans or something like that.

But that was the way we lived for the summer, and I think we stayed there in through October. John Reed gave me a motorized bike. [00:40:00] I don't remember why I was riding the bike around, because I had my pickup truck, Rosebud—was out there with me, because I had used it to move everything from New York. All of my stuff was loaded in the back of Rosebud. There's a photograph of me and Franz, which I think you probably have seen, me and Franz Kline in Rosebud, that was taken by Thomas Clyde, who was the husband of Mary Abbott, a painter at the time. Mary and Tom were married, and they had a big estate. She was a phenomenal cook of Chinese quasi-cuisine. Tom and Mary would often give these big parties. It was a very tight-knit and formal and informal community. And as I say, John Reed opened his shop in the middle of East Hampton; the photographer who took that picture of me that I said was in such dispute. So that's more or less what happened at the time.

There was a singular moment that happened that particular summer—Diana will remember the exact—yeah, I think it was 1956, '57—in that Marilyn Monroe had just married Arthur Miller. One of my close friends at the time lived right next door to where Diana and I were living. He was—God, I'm sorry about this, it will come to me. He was a sculptor, and he and his wife raised dogs. [00:42:01] At one point, they sold one of their puppies to Arthur Miller and Marilyn Monroe. At that time, apparently, from what I know about the background of this couple's marriage—was that she was trying—I thought she was a remarkable person in every way, and he was too. But he was trying to integrate himself in a way that his fame had separated himself, in some respects, to a lot of the other people there. Although many of the people that I met at the time who were there were people who had been working in Hollywood, and had very strong—developed reputations in the film and motion picture world, mainly as writers. And every year, as you know, there was this baseball game that went on between the artists and the writers. I do have three photographs of me at one of the games, taken by this guy, of which everybody was delighted that I struck out. [Laughs.] It was really wonderful.

But anyway—Philip Paveer [ph]. Philip Paveer and his wife, Marcia [ph], sold one of their puppies to Marilyn Monroe and Arthur Miller. And at one point, Philip called Diana and said, "Listen, we want to reunite the puppy that we sold to the Millers with our dog. [00:44:00] They're coming over and bringing [laughs] their dog. We would love it if you and Alfred

would come over." Franz and Betsy—who was, I think, living with Franz at the time, nearby—came over, plus this other guy, whose name escapes me, I mentioned before, who lived nearby. So it was Franz and Betsy, and Zogbaum—I think Zogbaum and his wife—and maybe even—oh, what's his name? I just got an email—Ibram Lassaw and his wife. There was a handful of people. I refused to go. I just had a sense of discomfort at the idea of being there, because it was like I was—how can I express this? Felt, in a way, like a kind of pandering towards someone who was very, very famous, and I thought that—it just made me feel uncomfortable that I didn't know them, know Miller before that. It just seemed like an awkward, awkward meeting. But Diana went herself.

One of the things that happened, a story that I told at a time when I was giving a talk about Franz's work someplace or another—and I told this story. When Franz and Betsy were having dinner with Diana and I, and he was describing what he did—and Franz was one of the greatest storytellers that I've ever met in my life. [00:46:11] He was phenomenal. He was a gracious, generous, wonderful man who lived a life of hell, you know, being a drunk, an alcoholic. So he said that as soon as [laughs] Marilyn Monroe and Arthur Miller left, he went over [laughs] and sat in the chair that she was sitting in. And then according to—I don't know, it was Diana or someone—he said, "It's still warm." [They laugh.] I thought that was kind of wonderful in its particular kind of innocence, and a kind of thing that I think would have driven—had Miller known about it—driven him crazy. Because recently my wife and I saw this documentary about Miller, and when he was married to Monroe—or just about Marilyn Monroe's life—and there were issues of things that he had written or spoken about, about his discovery of how many men that she had slept with before he met her. And it came as a great shock to him, as a great—and it was a very, very difficult thing for him to be able to deal with. That was what the text was all about.

Anyway, we came back, Diana and I came back from East Hampton, and I found this place at 108 Fourth Avenue, which is now across the street from the post office around the corner from here, a couple of blocks away. The building is now torn down, and there's something out there, a place there. [00:48:03] It was a complete, total shithole beyond imagination, but it did have high ceilings. It was very, very cheap. It had been a hiring hall for migrant workers, so it was filthy. I mean, about as filthy as anything you can imagine. And it was really a daunting prospect to figure out how to make it habitable, because we rented it and we needed to live in it immediately.

At that time, I had met a wonderful spray painter, who had done all the work spray painting my studio at 940 Broadway—had been burned down. I've forgotten his name. He was a remarkable man, also a drinker. I called him up and I said, "Look, I've got this place, and it's impossible to clean. It's filled with debris. I've cleaned out as much of the debris as I could, but I could spend the next year sweeping it up." I said, "What I would like you to do is simply come in and spray everything white, no matter—just as it is. If there's a piece of paper on the wall, don't take it off, just spray it white, and give it as many coats as I can afford."

And after it was done, the way I used to describe it—and when I've written about it [laughs] and everything—I said it was like seeing an enormous garbage heap that had been sprayed, freshly sprayed, or sprinkled with snow. [00:50:00] It was really beautiful. But it was completely possible to live in, because there was enough insecticide or whatever it is in it that had cleaned up everything. There were no mice. There was never—the only time there was a dead mouse we found somewhere, I think it had been spray painted [They laugh.] And so we just left it there. But it was a great place.

And it was at that time, when I came back, that I got the Polaroid Land Camera, and I began taking these so-called mug shots. It was purely accidental. I didn't have any big idea that I was going to do this, that, and the other thing. That early Polaroid camera was a masterpiece of engineering, if you've ever seen one. It had a crackly, sharp, beautiful lens. It had a—whatever you call it—opened up bellows that came out. And the pictures were astonishing. Of the one or two that I managed to survive out of the fire, a Polaroid of Sam Francis and of Al. Sharp, with marvelous resolution. It's amazing to think of. It was really a beautiful camera. It was that.

And it was at that time, around that time, that all of the issues of my reconciling—

[END OF TRACK leslie19_2of2_digrec_track02.]

ALFRED LESLIE: —all of these things began to press on me, to figure: What was I really

doing? And if I could only make films of people—and I never thought seriously about making a so-called abstract film, and here I was making these paintings, which I loved, and making sure I had no figurative elements in it. I figured, "What is this dichotomy? What is this break in my thinking?" And I realized, at that time, the only way I was going to be able to do it was to say, "You can be a painter, and you can be a good painter or a lousy painter. You can be an artist, you can be a good artist, and a lousy artist. But were you just a painter, or were you an artist?"

The word "artist" seemed to have a history of thoughts about who the creature was that was being called that, represented. And I realized that, for me, it represented a greater piece of open territory that, in the words of a Los Angeles painter—I think I mentioned it earlier on—who said that he—in his transition to an aspect of figuration that occurred in his work, he said he just stopped thinking like a painter and began to think as an artist, that he moved away. So I thought, "Look, this is going to be destructive. [00:02:03] All of the things that have happened to me are things that, for a lot of other people, they would say, "Well, just keep doing the same thing over and over again, and there won't be any [laughs] problems. You're even selling a couple of paintings. You are"—I was just about to be included in a number of shows at the Museum of Modern Art.

Diana and I had once made—the only person that I ever invited to dinner, of a high-functioning person in the art world, was Dorothy Miller. And where the American flag that I had bought from a store in Hoboken that had gone out of business—Diana and I draped it over a table, and the three of us sat down, and this crazy meal that I made that was based on a Polish recipe that Ibram Lassaw had adapted into his Egyptian cuisine. [Laughs.] So here it was. I decided I had to do this. And I knew it was destructive, it would be destructive, but it was simply necessary to me to do. So I don't change overnight, the way people thought I did. Everything I do is incremental.

I had started to take photographs with the Polaroid when Diana and I were living, that brief period, in East Hampton. I had another 35-millimeter camera, and I was, [laughs] you know, in a closet with a sheet over me, developing the film and stuff like that. So I realized I had to let everything happen the way it was going to happen. And that's when I wrote, I think, around that time, or earlier, the thing about careerists. [00:04:10] I was really talking to myself, making this decision of how I had to move forward. For me, the hardest thing was allowing the entry of a person, of a recognizable [laughs] figure, into the painting. Everything that I had avoided.

So I began to—what I call—deconstruct, or go into my abstract paintings and incrementally make changes. And when I began to make the changes incrementally, they appeared sort of like the collage elements that I was dealing with earlier on. I would have a painting. I would make a painting that had to be brought together all in one session.

In other words, if you look at some of the great Spanish paintings that are quite large, of a single figure, a lot of the times you'll see that in order to accomplish the overall structure and tonality of a picture that was tonally based—that you had to bring it together all at once. You couldn't very well resolve the tonality of an area behind a figure while the paint was dry, because it's too difficult. It was like, you had to do it as if you were driving a car at 200 miles an hour, and in order to stay alive without killing yourself by running into a barrier, you do, you have to become part of the machine. [00:06:02] Getting, in other words, into process. And when I got into process, part of the process I was getting into was letting what was, for me, the unthinkable happen.

So the unthinkable began to happen. Then, on the record of things that people said about me: I was betraying the artists, I was this, I was that, I was the worst imaginable. And at one point, someone said I was a Dostoevskian character, who was suiciding [laughs]—who was killing himself in terms of what I was doing. So at one point, when I started—my first idea, when I decided to put in a figure, was that I was making these pictures that were like giant collages, which—I think I called them abstract illusionist paintings. Crappy title, but it was a way for me to determine how to connect that area that I was going into. All of a sudden, I decided to—I said, "Why couldn't I put a head, paint a person's face into it?" And that was really, really tormenting. So I began to fiddle with that, and I came up with—there's a Yiddish word called *fakokt*. Oh, you know the word?

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

ALFRED LESLIE: *Fakokt*. It was a crazy idea, as most ideas, I think, can be called as crazy. [00:08:00] What my idea was, I would paint a picture that was basically abstract, but had a figure in it, and there would be hardly any figure that you could see, because most of it would be hidden between abstract elements.

So this was—I have actually a couple that survived. One that survived intact was the accident of my having loaned it to a museum in Los Angeles. Two years ago, they said they had discovered the painting in their basement—

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

ALFRED LESLIE: —and did I still want it? Would I give it to them? And they sent it to me. I have a photograph of it. I think it was called *Ladies with Peas and Cherries*. So what it was, a collection of elements that you could easily find in one way or another in my collages, and then in the background, a woman's face, a piece of a breast, a piece of an arm. And I hated them. I really hated them. But in the way that I worked, despite hating them, I said, "Look, you have to deal with this. What you have to do is make 15. Take a year and make 15 large-scale works. Do the best that you can, and then at the end, look at them, and then either discard the idea"—it may sound like a great and workable idea, but from my perspective, ideas have to be concretized. It's nice to be able to say, "This is that," but for me, the concrete evidence of my idea is the way a painter thinks: "This is what it is." [00:10:07] You can call it [laughs] whatever you want.

So I made this group of about 10, 15 paintings. I hated them. But you know, when you make a picture in your element—make something, a picture—you write something, and you're close to it, you really don't see it until it gets into another situation. So I had an opportunity, for whatever the reason was—I don't know why—are we still in—

LIZA ZAPOL: We're good. I'm wondering, the materials that you were working with, it was this sort of thick acrylic?

ALFRED LESLIE: Yes, okay. There was this stuff called Magna, which was a terrible invention of Lenny Bocour and his partner. It was one of the earliest avocations of a paint that was similar to oil paint but did not have the same qualities as, say, Liquitex, which has stayed within its boundaries. So Magna was compatible with oil, and Lenny's description of how great it would be was that he painted an area of a square up in Maine, on a block, a big piece of stone in the ocean. And every morning, the surf would come up and wash on it, and he said, "In six months, nothing has ever happened to it."

Well, what I discovered about it was that, sure, it would dry, but if it was in a warm place, it would start to melt. [Laughs.] I discovered that when a gallery, the Bud Holland—the Holland-Goldowsky. [00:11:59] Bud Holland was a dealer in Chicago, whose partner was this marvelous guy named Noah Goldowsky, who had been a left-wing bookseller in the '20s and the '30s, and he was a brilliant, brilliant man. He and Bud had opened up a gallery in California. Ultimately, Noah became Dick Bellamy's partner for a while after a crisis happened, when Bob Scull abandoned Dick financially for the first Green Gallery on 57th Street.

So anyway, I made these paintings, and I knew I had to get them out into the world to see them someplace else, because that was the only way I could know what I had done. But I loathed them. I loathed them. At the same time, I was not only making them as flat paintings, but as boxes. I would make these big boxes. The biggest one was about—eight-foot-square cube. You know—[laughs] I don't know how to describe it, but it was eight-foot around all—eight-foot-high, eight-foot-wide—in the all the dimensions. It was shown at the Allan Stone Gallery, in a benefit exhibition that was given for the first appearance of the—that organization for dancers and theater people, and it still exists today. I don't have any—I tried to get the Allan Stone Gallery, the current gallery, to give me the exact date of the show. They never answered. I wrote to this organization, which is—I'll think of the name very soon. [00:14:03] I even wrote it down so I wouldn't remember it. They never contacted me. It has been a week or so, but maybe they will.

I made these things, and then Bud Holland said, "Listen, we can show them, and we can see what they look like out here." So we shipped a group of them to the gallery in Chicago, and it was there I discovered the issue of melting, and the issue of the bitter cold weather there causing—as it was drying out and beginning to crack. And then, when it went into a warmer

environment, the paint would [laughs]—you know. Some of them that I have now—I think, if I'm not mistaken, there are evidences of the paint at a stage when it was very soft, beginning to run down. Well, those were qualities, for a while, which I thought were very attractive. That the physical presence of the paint in action, like language in action, paint in action, was very good. That things would happen with the material that had a certain kind of quirky life to begin with, but this is a way that something unexpected could occur, like, in the process—would bring you something that you could think you found out a new new, and that new new was going to be consequential, and I thought it was important to hold onto. So I showed them in Chicago and I hated it. God, I hated it. Actually, Bud sold one. [00:16:00] The collector got rid of it as soon as he bought it, because the criticism that they got verged on as about as nasty as one can imagine, if it was ever looked at.

But then I still needed to know more. So I decided to take my family, my wife Lisa at the time, and we went to California. I carried the paintings there. I had the paintings shipped to California. There was a trucking company called Crate and Barrel, or Crate and Ship, something like that. They had an empty space in the back, so they offered it to me. There was a gallery dealer who had a gallery there that offered me the gallery to show the pictures. I said I hated them so much, and this space was so neutral, and so big, I thought this would be a good place to do it. So I showed them.

LIZA ZAPOL: Where in California are you?

ALFRED LESLIE: Los Angeles. So the gallery, I think—they founded the gallery as a result of that, and it stayed in business for many years. I believe it was at that time that I had made this friendship with this man named Bill Brice, William Brice, whose mother was Fanny Brice, and maybe I mentioned this in the earlier tape. I had made that—came across—happened that I became friends with Bill and Shirley, because there was a theatrical agent named Priscilla Morgan, who, at the end of her life, at the end of Isamu Noguchi's life, was living with Isamu, and helped Isamu bring together all of the elements in order to establish his own museum. [00:18:22] Priscilla had wanted to become my theatrical agent, and so I would come and work and I would be one of her clients. In terms of being a film director, she would try to get me work.

When I went out and stayed—Lisa had just given birth to my son, Joseph, at that time. And he was still very young. Oh, I know why we went out there, the thing, because that had to do with the show that I had in Stockholm with Bob Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, that Pontus Hultén, the *Four Americans*—and Richard Stankiewicz. So we ended up staying with Bill and Shirley.

LIZA ZAPOL: So that was '60—

ALFRED LESLIE: '62.

LIZA ZAPOL: '62, I believe.

ALFRED LESLIE: Is that right?

LIZA ZAPOL: *Four Americans* was '62, yeah.

ALFRED LESLIE: Yeah, '62. That's how we got out, and that's how I met all these people in the Hollywood film community. One of the stories that I told at being offered this opportunity to direct this film was—fell apart, because one of the people involved, Henry Blanke—who was a former protegee of Ernst Lubitsch, and who had produced some remarkable films, including *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*—when he saw *Pull My Daisy*—and this I've written about—he went absolutely berserk. [00:20:06] He went crazy. This is in—Lisa and I had gone to his house with—did I tell this story?

LIZA ZAPOL: You haven't. I mean, I read it in the *Cool Man*, but tell me. I would love to hear the story.

ALFRED LESLIE: What happened, basically, was I met this guy, Jim Poe, and Jim was the president of the Screen Writers Guild at the time. The Screen Writers Guild had a complex history, because a number of the people who were involved were indicted by the House Un-American Activities Committee. But I knew Jim because his wife was Barbara Poe, and her parents were collectors. They were friends of Bill and Shirley's, and so we became very close.

A man that I had met before, a writer named John Collier, a poet and a writer, who was partially responsible for one of the most marvelous films I've ever seen, called *Elephant Boy*, the first film with Sabu—Sabu was like 11 years old. If you see the opening footage of that, it's unbelievable. This little tiny boy standing in front of the camera, reading, obviously off a monitor or something, saying, "Hello. My" [laughs]—just the life of an adolescent is so much there in him. It's unbelievable what he accomplished in his life. It was pretty amazing. [00:22:01] And the film itself was Collier plus a famous documentarian who worked with him, and a couple of other people who had gone together to make this film. It's called *Elephant Boy*.

And so when I met Jim Poe, John Collier, and Bill Brice, they wanted very much for me—everything okay there?

LIZA ZAPOL: I'm going to pause for a second. Sorry.

ALFRED LESLIE: Okay, I'm going to go the bathroom.

LIZA ZAPOL: Okay.

[END OF TRACK leslie19_2of2_digrec_track03.]

[leslie19_2of2_digrec_track04 and leslie19_2of2_digrec_track05 are test tracks.]

ALFRED LESLIE: Tell me when you're ready.

LIZA ZAPOL: Ready.

ALFRED LESLIE: Okay. So Jim and I got along very well. I love writers, I can't help it. I love the incisiveness of the way they think, and the way they manage language and tell stories. Jim and I became close friends, and I saw him very often at Bill Brice's house. And because of the way Bill was brought up, in the environment of Fanny Brice—his mother had only died about five years earlier, and his father had abandoned him. He only had seen him once, when he was a child, in his life. He had been brought up in private schools. A lot of people did not treat him well, because they thought everything had happened to him through privilege. But it was exceedingly hard for him to do what he had to do, because fighting off the attacks on him, like the one that Tom Hess made, which was so unexpected. I was so surprised that when Bill had his first show in New York at a gallery, Tom wrote a very petulant review, saying "Fanny's little boy," indicating that the only reason that Bill was able to get anywhere as a painter, and getting this particular show, was because of his mother. Aspects of it may be true, but it doesn't account for all the rest of it. [00:02:01] Not everybody has Bill de Kooning's background, or Rothko's background, but some have Alfonso Ossorio's [laughs] background. So it was all a question of stuff that went on.

But I made good friends with them, and Poe and Collier wanted very much for me to stay in California and become part of the film community. I didn't see myself being able to do it. Part of it was that I had been living all of my life under severe handicap. I had no hearing aids. If I take out my hearing aids—if we turn on the television now, at a sound which both of us can hear, I take out my hearing aids, I'm in silence. I don't hear anything. So that the way that I tended to function [coughs]—excuse me.

LIZA ZAPOL: Sure. Take a break.

ALFRED LESLIE: The way that I tended to function was to try to wrest—W-R-E-S-T—control of any conversation, enough that I had my bearings. The greatest example of it was when I was on a panel that Edwin Denby, the poet, was conducting at Cooper Union. Six or so artists besides myself, Edwin asking everybody to say something. So here we were, sitting on stage, microphones blasting out their sounds over here, with the loudspeakers there, lights in our eyes. [00:04:05] You couldn't really identify anyone in the crowd, but I couldn't understand a word. I had no idea—no idea—of what was going on. So I did what I did in every situation. Finally, at one point, Edwin said, "Now, Alfred, you always have something to say. How about it?" So I said, "Well, I'll tell you, everybody up here is just full of shit." And the audience burst into applause. [Laughs.] They loved it.

But clearly, that's not a good [laughs] way to be able to survive. It made things very, very difficult for me. I wouldn't say that it shaped my life. I wouldn't say that it influenced my work. I wouldn't say any of that. But it was a factor in the development of myself as a

person, period. I only got two hearing aids 27 years ago, when I met Nancy and she said, "I can't live with you." She's a psychotherapist. She said, "It's impossible. You're always saying, 'What? What? What?'"

So anyway, here I was, in this situation. These guys wanted me to stay there. Bill Brice's brother-in-law was a man named Ray Stark. You know who Ray is? One of the biggest producers at that time in Hollywood. He was the man who produced the film about Fanny Brice. He just produced a shitload. I mean, he was Mr. Big. [00:06:00] At one point, Bill was trying to get Ray to, you know, be part—and I say to him, "Bill, look, Ray is a great guy. What I do is what I do. If somebody gives me, say, $100,000 and a script and says, 'Make a film,' and I say, 'Well, then just give it to me and go away,' and I'll make something out of it. But otherwise, I can't function in a situation like that."

So these guys understood, but at the same time, dealing with a half-deaf person—which I did not even recognize how I was dealing with things at the time—made things maybe a little bit more complicated. So we finally—at one point, Jim Poe said, "Listen, I want us to all meet at Henry Blanke's house. He has a projection room there. We'll bring a print of *Pull My Daisy* and we'll show it to him. There's this script that I would really love for you to direct. I think you're the person to do it." Aside, I think I just discovered what it was that they wanted me to direct, which was the first Sidney Poitier film, about nuns, that he comes in—you know —

LIZA ZAPOL: I don't know that film.

ALFRED LESLIE: He's sort of an at-loose wanderer. He comes across a bunch of nuns living someplace or other, and they need a chapel built, and they sort of take him in, and he builds them a chapel. [00:08:05] In the end, Jim himself produced and wrote the script, based on a story—I don't know who wrote the original story. They got someone who I never heard of to direct it.

But anyway, before that, we all met at Blanke's house. And again, there's no exaggerating the situation at Blanke's house. You approach a gate. The gate's like the gate that King Kong was blocked from entering in—the people who lived there. You go in—and as I walked in, all of a sudden I saw this man, dressed in a white suit, who—I'm remembering him looking like Erich von Stroheim, but I'm sure he didn't. But he was wearing a white suit. Came running up the aisle, yelling, "Ah! Ah! There's the genius!" He grabbed the print out of my hand and led us down—my wife, Lisa, myself, Jim, Shirley, and the whole six of us, or seven of us—down into his house.

And he turns out to have been an amateur painter, so his house was filled with all of these paintings. When you walked up to it, you walked up some steps, and standing there was this young woman wearing a virtually transparent dress, with light behind her. You can imagine the shooting of this in a softcore porn or something. [00:10:02] She must have been, like, 17 or 18 years old. Looked like she could be what they call an au pair—what do they call it? Someone who takes care of your baby. This is Henry's wife. Very handsome woman. And Henry. I have no prejudice against Henry. I admired all the works that he had done.

And so we go inside, and he takes over the whole situation. Turns out his, quote, screening room, is this thing he has. I think it was, he had a place where there was a pull-down screen someplace in the house, and he had this fancy German projector, built in a big hardwood case, you know. So he takes it and he threads the film, all the time talking and talking. And as he was talking, I—it was like [sniffs]—like a dog. I just sensed disaster. I said, "There's nothing here that this guy is going to get. He's culturally from a different era, and there is something off-putting that I'm giving off," though I didn't think I was giving off anything. But Jim and John—Jim Poe and Bill Brice and—what's his name, the poet? They were all thrilled. Shirley Brice, everybody is happy. My wife is sitting there.

And then, the minute the film starts, and you hear, [sings] "Pull my daisy, tip my cup, all my doors"—he gets up, and he says, "Can I make anybody a drink?" [00:12:08] And for the entire time the film is going around, he's being the host. And every now and then, he stopped while he's carrying a drink or doing something, and he would say, "Genius! Pure genius!" But he's hosting at the same time.

At the end, the film ends and lights go on, and Collier and Jim Poe and Bill Brice, Shirley Brice, my wife, they're all happy. He's smiling, and then all of a sudden, his face twisted into

a kind of animal rage, really rage, like someone who's lost it all of a sudden. Really anger, and his saliva is spitting out of his mouth. He said, "It's shit! It's shit! It's just shit! I don't want *Pull My Daisy*! I want Shakespeare!" And he goes through this whole thing.

Everybody there is shocked, basically, [laughs] except me. But I must say I was a little bit shocked at how upset it made him. Though later on I realized, given what he represented as a wunderkind of his time, what he had come through as an immigrant, and then coming to Hollywood, living with Lubitsch, who was one of the greatest of the directors, in that culture, producing things like *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*—what was he going to be able to pull out of this plotless, little tiny thing? Which had beautiful elements in it, and in its way—because of all of those qualities—in its simplicity, in its fact, there was no violence, all of these other things. [00:14:12] And because of Kerouac's voice. My God, what a voice. It was just phenomenal. And Robert's beautiful camerawork.

Okay. It was not going to work, so we all left, and that was it. You know, he said, "I don't want *Pull My Daisy*." He just went crazy and off the wall. The next day, I told Bill—I mean, they were really devastated, because it all meant something to each of them individually. I can't particularly say what, but I knew it was very important to them. It meant something about the direction that cinema—that they wanted, they thought cinema was taking at the time. Blanke was clearly not the person who could move into this, and later people who were more specifically a generation of filmmakers who stayed away from the Hollywood sensibility—which I love, because what I thought was great about the Hollywood system, it was a great repertoire theater. People today politicize it, and they say, "Why don't they hire a Mexican when they're making a film, *Viva Zapata!*? Why don't they hire this one? Why don't they hire"—when you have a repertoire company, you use [laughs] the people that you have. I mean, I have seen, in films, where they were so [laughs] cost-conscious, where something is happening in the background, which you have to take the shot over, where someone walks accidentally in and pulls the—they leave it in! [00:16:06] I saw it in a Marlene Dietrich film, in which she appears in a golden, silver costume, you know all [laughs]—it was crazy. But that was the industry.

When you think about it as a repertoire theater, and as within a certain kind of conventions, that in its way, the pressures and everything that was unthinkable to want to have to deal with created certain kind of characteristics. So you had a story, and then they made the story over 10 times, all with different people. Almost invariable, every remake of it got worse and worse and worse. But there was two sides to it. There was the directors and the writers, like William Wellman, who were struggling to—and Howard Hawks, who was struggling to hold onto the film, and create a work that was beyond just the commercial access, and then to meet the needs, the industry needs.

Whereas, at one point, like Howard Hawks, as anybody who finances their own films, is a lunatic. So for them, the first challenge was getting someone else to put up their dough. And when they got the money, they could move forward, because they wanted all the access to the phenomenal technological improvements that had happened in cinema for the past 30 years—the time that I was there. The fact that the sound recording was so perfectly unbelievable. [00:18:01] Here are these people talking, and there's a guy in a building, two miles away, sitting there, monitoring the levels of the sound. There is the hundreds of cameramen, the equipment, the buying of all of the stuff. Bringing it all together was an awesome enterprise, and the fact that it was [laughs] under the control of people who were virtual—in our sense, in today's world, or even at that time—thought of as illiterates, it didn't matter! They brought something that was necessary, and they brought something that made it for what it was. And that was the whole evidence of what they brought—is in what everybody created. [Laughs.] You see some of those marvelous works, and you see some of those films, and you see some of them where the directors have gone, like, crazy in some sense.

I mean, I had dinner at one point, earlier on, with this guy, Abe Adler. The man who lived across the street was this great cameraman and director who did a number of early films of Marlene Dietrich. I'm forgetting his name at the moment. He was a brilliant, brilliant cameraman. When we talked, he kept apologizing for being a filmmaker. He said, "You know, I'm really a sculptor, [laughs] I'm really a painter." And he dragged me out of where I was, across the street, to his house, and I had to look at his paintings. But I saw what had happened to him, or at least that I recognized what happened to him, as I saw the progression of his films, because there was nobody to check him in terms of his excess of sensibility, which went on with such extremes that you lost your way. [00:20:28]

And it wasn't quite like—what is that film that this guy made about these—about 30 years ago? A guy who was also the director of this film with Robert De Niro? It was a film about five hours long. The first part of it all takes place [during] a graduation at Harvard or Yale, and for an hour and a half, you see nothing but people dancing and swirling around. The story actually begins in the second part. He lost his place in the industry because of it. It's a very famous, quote, commercial failure. I have a copy of it somewhere.

But anyway, this is the situation of what Blanke represented, and what the industry represented at the time, which I recognized immediately. I could not, for all the reasons of who I was, how I had fallen, accidentally, into this situation. So within a week or so, Lisa and I picked up our little son Joey, and we came back to New York.

By that time, those works that I had made, which I had shown at this Crate and Barrel place, or Crate and—Carrying Crate, whatever they called themselves—[00:22:13]

LIZA ZAPOL: In Chicago?

ALFRED LESLIE: Yeah. But no, this is the place in Los Angeles, where I showed these failed works.

LIZA ZAPOL: Okay, right.

ALFRED LESLIE: If you put down your—[points] that, and take off that, you can walk over. There's a strange painting on there, I think, which is visible. [Zapol moves to retrieve the painting.] The horizontal. It's got—like a poster on the side of a truck. It's where my printer is. You may see it. On the left. No, over—you see there, Liza, where the printer is?

LIZA ZAPOL: Yes. Here?

ALFRED LESLIE: Yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: This?

ALFRED LESLIE: Is there a strange-looking picture?

LIZA ZAPOL: There's one with three men here.

ALFRED LESLIE: Bring over the whole bunch, and maybe in that packet.

LIZA ZAPOL: Okay. This one here?

ALFRED LESLIE: Yeah. Maybe it's in there. If not, it's alongside of it. Yeah. These are things I'm preparing to—I don't know if it's here or not. I'll tell you. I don't think it is. It's there, but it's in a different part. I could show it to you later. I could show it to you later.

LIZA ZAPOL: [Returns to seat.] Sure.

ALFRED LESLIE: I could get up. Okay, anyway. Alright. Now, here, by the way, this painting here is the painting that made it possible for *Pull My Daisy* to be made.

LIZA ZAPOL: This was the one that sold for $1,000? [00:24:01]

ALFRED LESLIE: Yeah. The woman who—I just wrote a letter, three weeks ago. I couldn't figure out whether it had been bought and given to the Kunsthalle in Bern or the Kunsthalle in Basel. So I finally wrote to both places, and I just got an answer a couple of days ago, and I think it was in Basel—or Bern.

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

ALFRED LESLIE: I'm still not remembering which. They own the painting. There are many photographs of the painting being moved out of my studio, to be shipped to Switzerland, that were taken by John Cohen. He was always around, shooting still photographs, at the time of the film being made.

LIZA ZAPOL: What is this called, this painting?

ALFRED LESLIE: Let's see. *The White Spade*.

LIZA ZAPOL: It's that way. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALFRED LESLIE: So anyway, we went back to New York. By that time, I recognized that those works—the women with the fruit, this picture of this cup—was crazy. It may have been a good idea, as I said before, but I could not bring it to any kind of fruition, visually, that satisfied me.

So I just said to myself, "What you have to do is paint only in black and white." I constructed a group of ideas, which I called a laundry list, that you had a standing figure, you had no color. [00:26:09] In other words, what I decided to do, I had to make a painting that there was absolutely no way that you could think of it as being anything but a picture of a person. I thought anything that made it, quote, beautiful was an excuse. I just wanted to break through and say, portraiture, portraiture, portraiture, picture of a person, and eliminate everything that was not essential.

I wrote down—there's this thing of my so-called laundry list, and the first one that I was able to do started off as a picture of my wife, Lisa, at the time, nude. But in the front of her, her body was all covered up by one of these crazy elements. So I have, actually, a picture of that somewhere, and I also have a picture of the painting of her in progress, on the background of a photograph that was taken when Lucinda Childs did a performance in my studio, called *The Tulip*, or *Tulips*, or something like that.

So I started this picture of Lisa—

LIZA ZAPOL: This is Lisa with the apple in front of her.

ALFRED LESLIE: We took an apple in front of her and something. I took away the apple, cleaned it away, and little by little, incrementally, I built up this structure of the picture of Lisa, and then the picture of myself, a self-portrait. [00:28:00] Now, at this very beginning stage, I still had that goddamned Polaroid camera. So at the very first of the pictures, I would take a Polaroid picture of the sitter, and then I would enlarge it, or simply trace it—so it would be small—onto a piece of paper, and then enlarge it.

After I started—because I never finished any of them, pictures like this—I said to myself, "This is wrong." Going through the process of moving away from the dynamic interaction between the person in front of you, and that interaction of the drawing of that moving thing, is totally a different thing than using a photograph and then enlarging the photograph. It sees it in a total different way. And of course, you see the pictures that Titian painted, and you look at those Titians and how wildly distorted their bodies are. They were all because they didn't—they all weren't coming from this fixed ideology, if you want to call it, and mechanical notion of what is being seen as what a particular camera with a particular lens at a particular setting—all of those particulars, which change everything of the image in front of you. So at that point, I so-called, quote, “banished the camera.” It lasted, like, [laughs] a matter of 10 weeks. Not even that long. I have photographs of some of the things.

And at that time—I think it was 1962—in and around that time this was happening—I can tell you the exact date, because there was a film that was being made by CBS Television called *Directions*. [00:30:11] I think it was called *Directions*. It was made by CBS, and we were supposed to start shooting on the day that John Kennedy was assassinated. That was, I think, I believe, in January or December of '63 or something like that. It may have been early in '64, or a year forward. But they shot this film, and on the film it shows me in my studio, with a voiceover, talking about my work as an artist. It shows Lisa, shows—I have photographs of many of the crew of when the picture was made.

I even, at one point, had a 16-millimeter print of the film. It was stolen. There was one person who has a copy, and I have been after that person since the fire, and he won't give it to me. And the reason that I think he won't give it to me is because, at the time the film was made, he was an aspiring young sculptor, making sort of semi-hack works, like maybe the great—what's his name? The great American sculptor. David Smith. He eventually became an architect, and I believe he didn't want that ever to be seen. [00:32:02] There were three artists that were filmed. I have some reviews of the show and things like that, that I managed to find.

I even was able to get in touch with the producer of the film. He said, "I will find you a copy of it in the CBS archives." He never could find it. But this guy who—I wrote to his firm about six months ago, and asked him to please let me have the copy of the film, and I could get it—

and they never even answered. Why? What is at stake for this guy? I don't know. It's petulance. It's some other thing. It's kind of, to me, unimaginable professional behavior of an artist. I mean, if someone asked me [laughs] something, to have the information, I would give it to him, especially something like this. But this guy wouldn't.

And as I say, the CBS archives do not have a copy of it. But I have enough information to document that the film existed, plus Polaroids, the images that I duplicated and took myself of the camera crew and of the painting itself as it was being done. Shows the picture of Lisa and me, and I am handing over our son at the time, Joseph, like, from my hands to her hands. For me, that was very difficult to make, because part of it was, of course, the attack that I was under. [00:34:06] But the attack, actually, always represented a kind of testing of my will. Was I going to do what it was that I had to do, no matter what the consequences?

And even to this day, whenever people write about my work, or interview someone, there's always some kind of saying, "I don't know what like"—there's an interview, I think, with Al Held in the American Archives. Someone sent it to me, and Al says, "I don't know what the hell he's doing." I read that and I said, "How could Al not understand what I was doing?" And Bob Rauschenberg: "I don't know what that guy's doing." How could Bob—how? How? It seemed unbelievable to me. It was perfectly clear what I was doing. But to them, it was a betrayal. It was self-destructive. It was moving into a territory that could not be retrieved, because at the time, the general theme that was in the air, that was current, that—the stories involving people, and images of people, belonged to the photographer, belonged to the camera. And it was unimaginable that there could be a groundswell of returning to what was considered archaic and unthinkable. So this was the territory that I had entered.

I was not the only one. There were many other painters who were working towards similar ends as I was. [00:36:01] This big difference was that I had become a member of a group—very visible member of a group—and established a place with a life unto itself in that group as an abstract painter. So the transitioning seemed especially hard, like a moon landing. You land, but you hit the ground hard. So it was like a hard moon landing. So there it was, and the rest was my refining of the idea once I got into the territory.

The first painting that was shown was at the Whitney Annual, I think, of 1964. That was when the director of the museum came to the studio with Dick Bellamy. Dick was hesitant, because he didn't know if this guy would get it. I've forgotten his name.

LIZA ZAPOL: Jack Baur?

ALFRED LESLIE: Yeah. Great guy, at least as far as I knew him. Jack came, and he had this extremely positive response, and he said to Dick that we're going to make a show of all of these works. And then the studio burned down. After the fire—and I had begun to retrieve all of the elements and building of the work that was—rebuilding my chronology, and restarting everything all over again—Dick was constantly pressuring the people at the Whitney Museum to give me the show of the work that I had made after the fire, and anything that was left that survived because I had put some things in storage. [00:38:18]

They apparently, as far as I know—it was not a happy dialogue between him and the Whitney, because either Jack was not there anymore, other people were moving in, and the people who were moving in thought of me as a betrayer, as someone who was a coward. There were all of these moral—moralizing about who I was as a—I had a bad character.

Finally, they agreed to it. I don't know what Dick, in terms—this must be all in his correspondence at the Whitney. Finally, they agreed to it. It must have been, by that time, 1970, even. I don't remember. They finally agreed to it, and then they allocated a space in the museum that Dick did not like. So we canceled it, because there was no way to present the show as Dick would have wanted to present it in the space that they had given to us, offered us. So we just canceled it. And that was my relationship from that time on. Then I just kept refining, as best I could, the works that I had started on.

LIZA ZAPOL: What was Dick Bellamy or [Martha]—what were their responses to your shift in your work? [00:40:08]

ALFRED LESLIE: Dick?

LIZA ZAPOL: Yeah. Or Martha Jackson.

ALFRED LESLIE: Martha went crazy. She went crazy, because to her, it was a betrayal. It meant that all of her customers were saying, "This is insane. This means that all the works that he has done before is devalued. He can't do this." They were really angry, and people who owned my work, like—I think it was even Grunlinger [ph], who, when he came to my studio after this had happened, was in a rage. He really was angry, because he had put this whole effort in at promoting my work in Europe, and then all of a sudden, something else. There was no way to answer him, simply because no matter what I said, he was taking it as a personal affront.

There is an example. One of the most beautiful of the works that I did was—I think it was a version of the two-part horizontal that's in the Museum of Modern Art—was bought by this Swiss collector. The work disappeared. I had no idea where it was. About 10 years ago, maybe 15 years ago, I got an email from a curator in Europe. I don't remember his name. He said that he had been at a collector's house and he saw this painting of mine. It was in terrible shape, and it was left outside all year long, underneath an overhang by the swimming pool. [00:42:08] He took a picture of it. [Laughs.]

So at that time, I was doing business with Jim Yohe and the second version of the André Emmerich Gallery, just before—after André had retired. So I had Yohe call this man, whose name we found out, and I called him. I had people in Switzerland get in touch with me. Never answered. So for whatever the reason was, he had the painting, he was going to keep it, and as far as I know, it's still there. I can send you a picture of it. As I say, it's just simply there, and—whatever happened to it.

So that's that story of the consequences of all of these things that happened. Probably in it was buried some kind of resentment at the value of the painting being depreciated, because nowadays, especially with the way the auction houses have seized control of everything, and the way that our channels, so-called, of what's called information are used, you really don't know what's going on.

I'll give you—to me, was something that—I just read this morning—which surprised me. I found myself reading a book somewhere, I guess it's in the bathroom. I don't even know where I got it. Written by this guy. Kind of a, very interesting to me, detective story, but not really. [00:44:00] It's sort of like a stream-of-consciousness, and it reminded me of things that I read, more or less, in its own strange way, like an avant-garde piece of fiction from the 1930s. It was very strange. I think the guy—I have the book inside. But in it at one point, he's on his bed, trying to fall asleep, and he says, "Maybe I can dream—think about some factoid that I like." You know what a factoid is? Have you ever heard the word?

LIZA ZAPOL: I've heard the word, but I don't know the etymology, no.

ALFRED LESLIE: What do you think it means? This is not a challenge. What do you think it means?

LIZA ZAPOL: Like, a specific fact. Some kind of [laughs]—

ALFRED LESLIE: Norman Mailer invented the word.

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

ALFRED LESLIE: And Norman invented the word to reference a piece of fake information that has been repeated so many times, over and over again, that it's taken to be a real fact. And now the word itself has become the repository of the way you refer to a real fact. A factoid. And my reading it in this guy's book, who quotes virtually—sometimes I think he's quoting Kierkegaard. I mean, he uses certain literary references that seem to place them in another arena of challenge that a writer is dealing with. I kept thinking maybe I should write him a note, to his publisher, and say [laughs] "Listen, I don't know what you think a factoid is." [00:46:03] Anyway, so that was that.

But this brings us up into the territory where I began to, from the very beginning, try to incorporate storytelling, literature, and all of these other—these things into the work. The first time that I did it, with the most, I think, extended clarity—at least, extended clarity to me—was when I did the group—a triptych called *Act and Portrait*. So even when Dick saw the pictures, he said, "What is *Act and Portrait*? What does it mean?" So I said, "I don't know. It has many meanings, and for me, it's meaning is that I'm satisfied." [Laughs.] When I have that sense of satisfaction about something that I make, I believe, within the framework of

the way that I operate as an artist, I trust myself, and I move forward with it. And I figure, eventually, I'll find out what I am, what it is I'm trying to do.

So I made this body of work called *Act and Portrait*. It's a portrait of three women. Did you see it on my website?

LIZA ZAPOL: Can you describe it for us?

ALFRED LESLIE: The first is a picture of a woman sitting in a businessman's armchair, with very elaborate clothing, with flowers or something, holding a letter. The letter is a copy of the letter that Charlotte Corday gave to the famous French terrorist, Marat, in order to get in to see him, to stab him to death. Because Marat had, as I believe it, if I'm remembering correct—Marat had sentenced her father to death and killed him, so she murdered him. [00:48:26] In her hand, dressed as she was, in this business-like way, is this letter. And it says, "I beg you, let me come and visit you" or something. But it's a copy of exactly the letter that is in the David painting of Marat in his bathtub, holding Charlotte Corday's letter. Now, that's the first painting.

The second painting is of a woman who's wearing a semi-transparent blouse, sort of ornate a little bit, but you can see some aspect of her naked breasts. She's sitting in an armchair with her eyes closed, and there's a rifle across her lap. She is one of the women from the Weatherman Underground. I've forgotten her name. She's either alive in prison now or hiding in Mexico. I'm not sure which, but I've got—the third is a picture of a pregnant woman, half-naked from her waist up, and is sort of a take on a de La Tour or Caravaggio-esque image, of a woman, naked, sitting three quarters, like that, with her hands like this, and light, as if light is flowing from her vagina, her womb, up into her hands. And its title—it's given the title—it's supposed to be the first woman doctor in the United States. [00:50:04]

So there are three women, all who've made different choices. There is Charlotte Corday. Then there's the woman who's the member of the Weather Underground. Then there's the woman who becomes the first woman doctor in the United States. *Act and Portrait* refers to a text by this insane historian who wrote *Decline of the West*, and it's a chapter, *Act and Portrait*, about the difference between Greek art—which, as he says, deals with boundaries and pushes away the human element and tends to idealize the figure—and then what he calls portraiture, which has to do with the story of the lives of the people who are being represented.

So for me, that was a compilation of ideas that had so many entrances and exits, in so many ways. It was like, imagine a great ball with a hundred arrows sticking in, and each one having more arrows sticking in, all of them containing—this could go anywhere. And where chance would come into the understanding. To me, these three pictures were always supposed to be exhibited together. They were bought by Sydney Lewis, and Sydney donated them to the museum—one of—

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ALFRED LESLIE: —the museum that he built and founded in Virginia, Virginia Museum of Art, the Sydney Lewis Wing or something like that. They have never, to this day, as I understand it, exhibited all three paintings together. And as far as I know, they've never even exhibited one.

So this was the reception of *Act and Portrait*, and to me, *Act and Portrait*, as being one of the earliest extension, is the clearest example of the kind of thinking that has branched out and which I've developed ever since then, in all of the works, including the works that I now call pixel scores. The reason I call them pixel scores is because I make them on computer, and I see them as this arrangement of pixels. In a way, it reminds me of a musical score, that I have this score, which has been visualized as an image on the computer because of the nature of the machine, and then I'm able to paint, be able to make an image on.

One of the problems with the technology is that the technology is changing all the time. What I decided what to do, that I had to, during what's left of my life—to make these hundred, which is called *A Hundred Characters in Search of an Author*, based on the Pirandello play—and there's a story about Pirandello, which maybe I told in the earlier—yeah, you're nodding your head yes.

LIZA ZAPOL: In terms of your relationship to Piscator and—[00:02:00]

ALFRED LESLIE: My relationship to Piscator and that whole author all came from my introduction to Pirandello. Pirandello, who in terms of his thinking, and characters—there's always three characters, or seven characters, in search of an author. To me, that represented a theme which I embody in some way with my work. That is to say, there is a center, and then these people walk in on the stage and say, "What about my story? Are you going to tell my story?" [Laughs.] "Got to find me an author. Come on, now. I don't want to be left out."

Well, in a way, that's, I think, in a sense, what I try to find here. Although some now people read it as, this is purely literary. It is literary. It would be great for people to read the books that these characters appear to, but in the end, the characters have nothing to do with the stories at all. They're pictures, they're images, and whatever chance brings in between the relationship of a viewer—depending upon what time in history, if the picture has survived—sees the picture, then you have whatever constitutes meaning. So that's how I got where I am today.

LIZA ZAPOL: Well, [laughs] I have so many questions—

ALFRED LESLIE: Go ahead.

LIZA ZAPOL: —on the in-between.

ALFRED LESLIE: Yeah, absolutely.

LIZA ZAPOL: What you're talking about right now, about viewer, reminds me of something. When I came to visit you on Friday, we spoke a little bit, just pre-interview. And you talked a bit about what your connection is to the viewer. [00:04:03] What you're hoping to—how you hook a viewer—you were talking about the beginning of *The Last Clean Shirt* and how you sort of want them to project their own meaning into the work. Can you talk—

ALFRED LESLIE: They can't help it, right.

LIZA ZAPOL: Can you talk a little bit about that, perhaps, as a through line in your work as well?

ALFRED LESLIE: Well, it's nothing—actually, I don't think there's anything that could be said about it. A work is made, it goes out into the world, it enters an unknown environment by unknown people, and then there's an interaction that is unknown, and you never know how it's filtered. All you know, that it's going to be either politicized and damned, politicized and celebrated. In some way, it's going to enter into the world, or simply disappear. And if somebody cares about it, they will protect it. It's that, the value that you hope the picture contains, that there's someone who cares enough about it to protect it and not destroy the painting like the Swiss collector did. And not be so, as I see, irresponsible, not to even offer to sell it to—or as I said to him, "Either sell it to me, or just give me back the fucking thing." It was as simple as that.

But again, to me, it's always chance. For me, it's a question—I make something. I know what it is, but at the same time, I don't know what it is. I make it with my wanting something to happen in relationship to it, but at the same time, I want nothing to happen to it but for it to survive. [00:06:08] Originally, in that Grizzi [ph] book, I talked about challenging photography. I talked about all of these things. But in the end, all that's left is the picture. That's all that's left. You just have to trust yourself. That's why I was always willing to go in any direction that may be suggested to me.

There's a wonderful interview on playwriting that I read recently by Paddy Chayefsky. If you saw—ever seen that film *Network*? Which I think is brilliant. It contains so much rage, and it's really Shakespearean. And the way that Chayefsky—who, as far as I've heard some people say about it, was on the set every time while it was being made, and essentially was either the person behind—forcing the director to comply with his will and the wishes for the performance. As you watch that film going forward, and it becomes wilder and wilder, it does become, like, Shakespearean, and very, very dark. When this guy is waving his arms and saying, "I don't want to"—and then falls on the ground, as if he's having some kind of a seizure. I think that's utterly marvelous.

And what Chayefsky says in this interview, he says you've got to trust yourself. You've got to trust yourself and go along with it. [00:08:02] And then you have to learn that when you're editing, when you come up to something and you say, "I think I should get rid of it," he says you must not decline that offer. Just get rid of it, period. That's something that I did without even knowing what he said, because I'm completely naive when it comes to all of these factors about how these things are made, how other people make them. I just did what I had to do, and try to put that in the paintings in order to be able to advance it forward.

For example, there was a show that someone—I got here an email announcing a show about the color green. It said that green was a notoriously difficult color to paint because of all of the associations that come along with the color. Well, I always thought that was kind of a reach. It's just a hard color, for whatever the reasons are. I don't really know, and I can't even comment why it happens to be a hard color. Could be political. It could be cultural. Who the hell knows? But I made a number of pictures using a lot of green. One picture I gave to the Whitney, because I hoped they would take care of it. It's called *Big Green*. And another version of *Big Green* was actually bought by Allan Stone, which recently the gallery sold for someone for, like, 10 cents, just to get it off their hands or something like that.

So I thought, "What they don't get is that when an artist is willing to trust in terms of what they're doing, and not try to manage—there's a way in which you have to manage what you're doing intricately, overseeing every step, but at the same [laughs] time, letting go." [00:10:23] That's the only way that you can discover something. That's entering into process, what I said before about getting into a car and driving at this wild speed, and which your body has to become part of the machine, like one of these jockeys on a racehorse where there's an intimate connection between the physical presence of the rider, the trust.

I never understood that about animals. I've always been, as a child, kind of afraid of horses. I had a crazy experience when I was about seven that had to do with the milkman's horse.

LIZA ZAPOL: What happened?

ALFRED LESLIE: Well [laughs] I was about six, I guess, or seven. I was living on Elder Avenue at the time. And the public school I went to was on Bruckner Boulevard, and it was—I could walk from where I lived on Elder Avenue—I think it was 1161—walk straight the two or three blocks, and then I got over to Bruckner Boulevard, and it wasn't built—there was always a lot of traffic there, but nothing like it is now. There would be a crossing guard, and I would cross to the school that I—public school.

It was a time that I remember, as a child, I always was making great discoveries. I remember the one point when I thought I discovered mathematics and time. I was walking, and all of a sudden I said, "Oh, 60 miles an hour. [00:12:05] Sixty [laughs] minutes in an hour." You know, space and time connected in that expression, and I stood there. Well, on this day, or one of the other days, I had been made a crossing guard, and wore a white band across my chest that was made of oil cloth. I don't know if you've ever smelled what this early version of oil cloth was like, like licorice. It had an odor like licorice.

So I was walking to school, and at that time, the milkman came around with a horse and wagon. The horses were very special. The milkman would be at the end of Elder Avenue, and he would stop, and he would go to the back, and he would take up a case of milk. And as he carried the case out, the horse would walk up to the next place and wait for him while he [laughs] delivered it, and he would go all along the way. That's the connection that he had with this animal.

Now, at that time, there was, of course, the movies. Saturday afternoon, you go in at ten o'clock in the morning, you sit in the children's section with the matrons, and you see a dozen chapters, cartoons and everything, and then two films. One of them, I—there were hundreds of cowboy films, and at that time—Roy Rogers, all of these variety of cowboy films that we were treated to as a child. [00:14:01] I had always remembered that there was this grandeur—that's the only way I could describe it—the grandeur, one of these cowboys walking up to one of these huge animals and patting him on the nose and saying, "How are you doing, partner?" and putting in his pocket a piece of fruit, and the horse eating it, and patting it on its nose.

So [laughs] one day, I'm walking to school, and I have an apple in my lunch. I'm walking down, and I've never been close to a horse. There's the milkman's wagon. The milkman is

out delivering. The wagon is there. I'm wearing this white thing, and I pick up the apple, and I stand in front of this huge beast to offer him the apple. All of a sudden, this mouth opens, with a blast of air that's so—like a sewer. Big, irregular teeth, [snorts] like that. It's gone. So fast. I never saw anything like it in my life. It's not enough. That fucking horse wants more. And it bears down, sort of nudging me, and goes [sniffs] and he smelled that goddam strap. All of a sudden, he grabs it in his mouth, and I'm being pulled off the ground! I managed to get free. I [laughs] never again went near a horse in my life.

Years later, I'm an adult living in Massachusetts. My wife at the time is a woman who thinks all horses are marvelous, though I think she's never really known anything about horses or any animals. [00:16:00] She buys a pony for my daughter. And this pony is really a bad animal. I don't know if you know anything about ponies.

LIZA ZAPOL: Not really.

ALFRED LESLIE: A bad animal. I had been working with a carpenter, local carpenter, building an addition—building my first studio there, in Amherst, where I was living for a couple of years. I called him up. I forgot his name. I said, "Listen, I know you know about horses." I said, "I was wondering if you could do me a favor. There's this animal. I think he's really dangerous." I said, "Could you come over and look at him? I don't like the idea of children coming near it. My wife has bought him for, like, $10. I think they just wanted to get rid of this beast. He's just sullen and angry. I mean, I don't know anything."

So he comes. Short, stocky, like a caricature of a working-class guy. He walks over to the horse, and the minute he stands in front of the horse, the pony turns away from him. So he grabs the bridle, and he forces the horse to look at him, and the horse is pulling away. It won't look at him. He's holding it like this. Holds it, and he lets go, and the horse pulls back. He says, "Kill it." That's it. Then I discovered, later on, that there's a history of deformed animals that come in in that sort of pony class, that are really very dangerous, dangerous creatures because of the nature of the breeding.

The greatest example I ever saw, while I was living out in Amherst, was there was an auction that I used to go with my family, I used to take my wife and children to, that sold everything. [00:18:04] It was like a farm auction. You would go in at the very beginning, they would auction off Hershey bars. I would say, "How much for a bar?" "One Hershey bar for 10 cents." "Okay." Then that means you could buy a thousand of them for whatever they were, 10 cents. So it would go, and then it would gradually increase from the Hershey bar to small animals, like mice or gerbils, then little birds, chickens, pheasants. And the final thing that everybody waited for was horses.

The guy who ran the auction owned this farm. He was a horse breeder. The auction was in a tall, very narrow shed. Really big. On one side, there was a bank of people where people sat, and on the other side was nothing but him, on a high pedestal. He must have been 12 feet off the ground, looking down. He looked, from what I could tell, like sort of a skinny guy, like—who the hell—what was this creature? He was selling all this crap.

All of a sudden, they brought in some mares, and then they brought in a stallion. When you bring in [laughs] a stallion, and it's near mating time, whatever, they're going and [sniffs] they're coming in, and there's danger afoot. This is not an animal whose testicles have been tied off. That's how, you know, in a film, they get them to buck and everything. [00:20:00] This animal is sort of crazy, and it's jumping. It's a big, big horse. All of a sudden, this little tiny guy jumps from where he is, down to the ground. He must have been as big as Bette Davis. I mean, he's under five feet tall, at least. He's a little man, and he walks over to this animal, and he grabs onto this, and—don't ask me how he did—he grabs onto the harness, and in a second, he is on that goddamned horse's back, and he has it under control. When I looked at him, and whenever I've thought of him, I think, "This is one of those crazy Scots in the 12th century, living up in the hills, you know, who had this in with nature, this understanding of animals and animal life." He calmed the—and all of a sudden, the horse is doing what he wants, and he walks out.

LIZA ZAPOL: So you got into this story about animals because we were talking about—

ALFRED LESLIE: About the horse.

LIZA ZAPOL: —in a way, wrestling creativity, or wrestling—

ALFRED LESLIE: Yes, yes, yeah.

LIZA ZAPOL: I'm reminded of a story—I think you were talking about *Pull My Daisy*, which people mistake as being improvised, which it wasn't. It was structured.

ALFRED LESLIE: It was totally structured. I told the story a thousand times over. Unfortunately, or fortunately—I don't know what it was, because I hate to characterize why people do things. But everything that I said always ran counter to whatever Robert said about the making of *Pull My Daisy*. So I can tell you exactly how *Pull My Daisy* came about. Simple.

During the time that I told you I stopped making films, I never stopped thinking about making films, and I never lost contact with my film partner, who I think—there's a picture of me and him together. [00:22:14] Tom Guarino. I was always plotting to figure out a way and internalizing my thoughts about how I could make films again without destroying my relationship to contemporary abstraction, contemporary painting. I was very concerned that I was being led astray into the multiplicity of things that I had a yen for. Writing, and filmmaking, all of these things that drew me away from my physical connection to paint. So at one point, I decided, "Okay, there's only one thing to do. I am going to figure out a way to create a film unit, a unit to make films."

Now, 1953, I think it was, I was still living in Hoboken, and I was with the Tibor de Nagy Gallery. And I think I mentioned in the other interview that the director's boyfriend at the time was Herbert Machiz, who had been a protégé of Orson Welles. These two summers, or one summer—I don't remember which—of working in summer stock, where I met all of these people that came out to visit—Lenya, Lotte Lenya—and did the sets around the corner for the first English language version of *The Dybbuk* at the Fourth Street Theater for David Ross. [00:24:02] So I thought, "Okay, I know all of these people that I worked with in the theater." I said, "With luck, I can construct a repertoire company, like Orson Welles had done with the Mercury Theater." It's a repertoire company.

So I tried to get in touch with my friend Tom Guarino, not knowing that Tom was dying of cancer at the time and would be dead by the time he was 30 or 32 years old. In fact, I never even knew he was dying that bad. I never even knew when he died, because no one in his family told me about it, and his wife—nobody ever contacted me. I think his wife never contacted me because I think she was always jealous of the friendship that Tom and I had when we worked together, because it always drew him away from their family life, because Tom had began earning his living as a teacher and making photographs on the side.

Anyway, I tried to get in touch with Tom, and couldn't do it, couldn't reach him. But at that same time, Diana and I had accidentally moved into Leon Polanski's [ph] loft at 36 Third Avenue. Next door was living Robert Frank, with his wife, Mary, at 34 Third Avenue. Below him was Miles Frost [ph] and his wife, living in this little building. In the next loft, over there was the photographer John Cohen, who was living in that loft. [00:26:00] And then a little further up the street, this painter named David Budd—whose wife was this woman I mentioned in the other interview, Corcaita Christiani—was living, and in the same building was this composer, whose name at the moment eludes me, but there was this composer who worked as an A&R man in the music business.

Also at that time, I had made—from 1948, '49, met and had a passing friendship with Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Kerouac, and that whole bunch. I never was able to—I think I told the story about Allen coming to visit Esta and I in Hoboken in the other tape. Well, Allen had been—

LIZA ZAPOL: Oh, yes.

ALFRED LESLIE: She was working—

LIZA ZAPOL: Where he was propositioning [you].

ALFRED LESLIE: Yeah, yeah. Allen was remarkable. At that point in time, for my fact that I had become very friendly with Robert and his family, and Mary—Mary was very young at the time. She had this baby. Mary Frank. Robert was always traveling and shooting all of the photographs that had come to be *The Americans*. Occasionally, either me alone or me and Diana would go with Robert and drive with him to different places, so he wouldn't be alone. It was very helpful. So there was a relationship established.

When I was reconnected with Kerouac and everything, he began going out with Dody Muller. [00:28:07] Dody was a very old friend of mine that I had met the very day she arrived from Texas in New York. Dody, whose name was originally James—I don't know if it's true or not—said that her great-grandfather was one of the James boys from the myth of Texas. She had a gap tooth. She was a feisty, tough Texas [laughs]—you know, you could have cast her in one of those Westerns. She was great, beautiful, and on top of everything. She was very, very smart.

So Dody started going around with Jack. And at that point, Dody said—I told this story a hundred times, so there will be—I'm sure I'm misremembering it in some places, but I'm doing the best that I can here. Dody suggested to me, said—I wanted to make my idea, when I got to know Robert better, my idea of creating a film unit with Robert instead of Tom Guarino as my film partner. Occurred to me maybe it was possible. Robert was indifferent to the idea, because he was a documentary photographer. He was used to his camera and his self, going out and making all the choices. He wasn't involved with the cinema, although he, emotionally, I think, was involved with it.

He, at one point, in the—I guess it was the early—maybe 1950 or so, in Provincetown, he and Ivan Karp, who was a writer and also a director and the owner of the Ivan Karp Gallery for a long time—the last time it was around was, I guess, in the '70s, downtown, on Broadway, Lower Broadway. [00:30:16] They had made an aberrant move towards shooting a film together, and it was kind of like the early films that a lot of people made that were vaguely connected to the high style, silent comedies. This, as I remember, that Ivan wrote—it was like a monster appearing out of the ocean with seaweed and everybody running around. Rudy Burckhardt had occupied this territory in New York, if I can use that expression, and had a heart, and was very—his sensibility was very full. He was brilliant. But this was an aberration.

But then Dody said, "Look, why don't you get a work of Jack's and try to make something of Jack?" I said, "Well"—I said, "The problem is, I've read a lot of the things Jack writes. I just can't imagine somebody speaking with that language." I can meet someone who says, "Hey man, let's go find a chick," or, you know, that bullshit, but thinking of an actor saying it seemed awful. Seemed just total disaster.

So anyway, at one point—there was no money involved. I had no money. Robert, who came, I believe, from a wealthy Swiss family, apparently had money, but he acted like he had no money at all. [00:32:08] Whatever. Not a criticism, just the fact. And Mary also—her father was a composer. Her maiden name was Lockspeiser. Anyway, Dody said, "Look, why don't you go? I want to go out and have a conjugal visit"—I mentioned this to you—"with Jack." So Robert and I drove Dody out to visit Jack. And at that point, there was kind of a friendship that was close enough, and understanding of each other enough, between Robert and myself, that it seemed possible to work with it. And I sure loved his camerawork. It was really beautiful.

So we got there. Dody and Jack disappeared, and I told you the story about Mrs. Kerouac giving us the food, and I throwing up in the garden in the backyard. But at that time, Jack had a tape recorder, and he said, "Here, you can listen to this." I had read all this stuff of Jack's and I couldn't get it. He put on this, and here he was, reading the three acts of his play, the *Beat Generation*, onto a tape. And in the background, there was this voice, a man called Symphony Sid. Who was Symphony Sid? Symphony Sid was a guy who was passionate about jazz. A so-called DJ, who, as far as I understood, was broadcasting from the back room of a club on Broadway, who spoke like this: "Hey, man. [00:34:00] This is me. I'm here. We're going to hear some Miles now." You know, imitating a Black musician, with a raspy voice, hip beyond hipness. He was great.

So there is Jack, with that voice of his, this lyrical voice. What a voice. He could have been a great singer. What a marvelous voice he had. I was stunned. And he's reading all the voice parts. He's just reading the play. And in the background is Symphony Sid, playing all this great music. The idea, the concept, of how to do something of Jack was like two arrows [laughs] piercing my head, both from the same side, and lodging in. I said, "If there is anything that can be made of anything about Jack, with Jack, there has to be a way to do it with his voice."

My idea—this is all—I thought, like, I constructed—was a construct that took place in 15 seconds [laughs] in my head, was that it could be created if I dealt with it like an animated

film, and that to start off with the voice track, and the voice track would—using the voice track as a marker, just create all of the images that would go in and fit the voice track along the way. But instead of being animated drawings, like Popeye and all the rest of it, it would be real people talking. I thought I didn't need—I had no idea if this was possible. Plus, of course, there was no money to do it. [00:36:01]

Dody finally decided to stay over with Jack, and Robert and I drove back. I was on fire at the time. I was totally on fire. And I can see that my enthusiasm could be a real pain in the ass, because I have had instances in my life when I have thought of making something, and I realized I couldn't do it, I nearly fainted. I had an instance of this, one point, when I thought of shooting this film on infrared film. I woke up in the middle of the night—this is when I was living at 940 Broadway—and I said it out loud. I said, "Where are you going to get the money from? You'll never get the money." I swear, I nearly fainted. Nancy has pointed out to me, since we've been together, that it's just part of who I am, that I have this thing. I get up in the morning, I think about my work. I'm laying in bed, I'm thinking about my work. It's terrible to live with. But since I got hearing aids, it makes it a little easier. So I'm sure I drove Robert crazy. He did not want to have anything to do with it.

So finally, we got back to New York, and I said, "Okay, we'll figure something out. Can we somehow"—I think it was, I said—"agree to working together on producing something?" In the meantime, then, I thought I would take Robert's film that he had shot with Ivan Karp and try to re-edit it, and to try to bring it into something. [00:38:04] I tried recutting it, and I couldn't make it work. I had no feel for the footage, and to me, it just went nowhere. I showed it to Rudy Burckhardt, and he said nothing, which is the way Rudy was. But he could speak when he wanted to.

So I thought, "The only way to do it is to try to raise some money." So it was at that point that I tried to find where Tom Guarino was, because when I left Hoboken, the film that I had made with him, *Directions: A Walk after the War Game*, was in Tom's hands. He was taking care of it. He had a more stable life. He was married, had two daughters. He was living in Levittown. He was a teacher. And I was—I had bad control over how I lived my life, but I managed to do my work. I couldn't reach Tom. In the meantime, I started trying to contact all the people that I knew who could possibly fund, to give Robert and myself money for whatever it was was going to be made. And then Robert tried to find people who would give us money, but in no instances could money be raised. After all, there was no evidence. I couldn't find my film, and Robert, the film that Robert had shot earlier was—really, you couldn't convince anybody of anything with that.

By that time, I had thought that the way to do something of this script, of my conception of it, was to make a trilogy, three short films put together, and that it would make something that could be exhibited in a theater. [00:40:16] And because the theaters were collapsing, all of the industry was in its process of changing, and they weren't able, in Hollywood, to produce the product that went to local theater owners. There was a lot of empty theaters that were occurring, and you saw there was economic disaster, as television was already beginning to take over that aspect of people's lives.

So we went around, could not raise any money. We went to various people, and then it was at that time when Arnold Rüdlinger came to my studio with Pontus Hultén, and they saw that painting that I showed you, *The White Spade*, and Rüdlinger said, "I'm going to buy it for Mrs. Geigy." And then a week later or so, or something like that—no, it was much later, because they actually—I'm trying to think how this worked. Because they bought the painting—they gave me $1,000 immediately. Mrs. Geigy gave me a thousand dollars immediately, but didn't take possession of the painting until we were in the middle of the production of *Pull My Daisy*. That's why I have John Cohen's photographs of the painting being carried out of my studio into the truck, to be delivered to Mrs. Geigy. [00:42:09]

So the minute I got the $1,000—I was living with Diana at the time, you can ask her what she remembers about it if you want—I called Robert and I said, "Look." I said, "I got $1,000. Let's take it, we'll go out, we'll rent a camera. I have an idea of all the people that can be in this. We've got this script of these three films that I wanted to make." One was this script of Jack's, an adaptation of the third act. And then the other was a story that I had written, called "The Flag," which was a story about—sort of a dopey, sentimental story about an Italian immigrant who lives in the suburbs and is a shoemaker or something like that. His neighbors are outraged that he has an American flag in his front yard, and they're all pestering him until the day that Japan attacks Pearl Harbor and everything is transformed.

It's called "The Flag."

And then the other was a story that was—I actually found the author of the story. It was a strange story. I'm trying to remember the author of it now. I read it in the *Partisan Review*, about 19—I read it in *Partisan Review*—Isaac Babel's—the story. [00:44:05] Isaac Babel—the Isaac Babel story. It will come to me. I had read it in *Partisan Review* in something like 1947, and I thought, "Oh, this is great to be my story of the flag, this Isaac Babel"—"The Sin of Jesus" by Isaac Babel, who I loved as a writer.

So I got this woman that I had worked in earlier at the Yiddish Theater—I mean, at the David Ross play, when I did *The Dybbuk*, who was from the Yiddish Theater—and she made a translation, her own translation, into English. I thought I could adapt it. So there was "The Flag," then there was *Pull My Daisy*, which did not have that title yet, and then the Isaac Babel story, "The Sin of Jesus." And so I called Robert and I said, "Look, I've got $1,000. We can go out, rent a camera, and I have an idea of who all the people"—he knew all of the people from the times that he had been in Provincetown. Now, I don't think he was ever as close to them as I had been, but he knew them all.

So I said, "We'll do it." He said, "If you have $1,000 to put in, I'll put in $1,000." I thought, "That's amazing! Look at that, we've got $2,000!" That was a big deal. And at that point, Walter Gutman, who was a financier and a sometimes-painter, but really a pursuer of young girls in the art world—but he had been, when he was much younger, an art critic, and wrote art reviews for various magazines. [00:46:07] He was a nice guy, but I think I told you a story of how nasty he was to Dick when he was dying. When Walter heard that Robert and I were going to put in $1,000 apiece, he said, "Well, if you guys are willing to each put in $1,000 each, I'll put in $1,000." So now we had $3,000.

So now we had $3,000, but Walter had two or three young people who worked with him in that market, doing these market letters that he wrote, and he got each one of them to invest, I think, $750. So in the end, we had, what, $3,000, plus three times—about $6,000, $7,000, all of a sudden, virtually within a week. It was totally amazing.

So the film that was easiest to deal with—making the first thing of—was the film that came to be called *Pull My Daisy*. At first, we thought of shooting it in Robert's loft, because it was a nice, easy situation. It was virtually empty, and not as cluttered as mine, but it was much too small. So then we shifted it over to shooting in my studio. Diana, at the time, was still working with Barney Rosset in his publishing office.

So then everything began to get together, and I knew immediately that the people who to cast were all very simple. [00:48:00] It was easy to cast Allen, Peter, and Gregory. Alice Neel, I thought immediately that she was the perfect person for it. She was a literary person, she had a great heart, and I loved her work. I loved her as a person. She was a very, very special creature. So the thing was—here, basically, was the cast. We had to get someone, and I thought—someone outside of Allen, Peter, and Gregory—the person who I thought was the best characteristics—he had a great schtick, and had been in a lot of Rudy's films, was Larry Rivers.

Larry was great. He had a great sense of improvisation, a great sense of himself, and I loved—every now and then, he would go into his little dance, you know, doing that thing, sort of like Harold Lloyd would do. [Taps feet.] [They laugh.] You know, if you ever saw that silent film when he's a college student. [They laugh.] I forget the phrase that he used. But I thought it was great. So then, with Larry as—

LIZA ZAPOL: —as Mezz McGillicuddy.

ALFRED LESLIE: Yeah. The other thing was the wife, Neal Cassady's wife. Raymond Parker—the painter, Raymond Parker—was a close friend of mine. His wife at the time, Denise, was a theater person, so I thought—I said, "Look, I think Denise could do that. She has some really great qualities." I talked to her for a while. She was excited to be able to do it. Ray thought it was great. So she came over one night, and I had written an opening to the film. [00:50:04] What it was, it all took place at night. The opening was based on a toy that had belonged to the daughter of Ibram Lassaw, Denise Lassaw. And what it was, it was a toy, that I think it either—you wound it up, or you just pushed a little thing, and it was battery-operated. You put it—it was a car. What it did was it rolled along, and it sometimes would come to a wall, and it would go [verbalizes smashing sound], but it wouldn't give up. It wouldn't turn away. It

was like a crazy person battering against the wall until the battery went dead.

So I thought: Oh, this is great. The opening can be the picture of Denise at night, dressed in some kind of kimono, in a semi-darkened room, and she opens up, and in the background you hear Vivaldi. You hear this [sings melody] *da, da, da, da, da*, or something from some of those beautiful lyric passages of Vivaldi. *Da, da, da, da, da. Da, da, da*. The whole schtick of Vivaldi. So beautiful, and full of what you could call, in the theater, heart. And then you see her get up, and she sort of starts this car. Then, as this is playing, the car is beating against the wall. Like it needs a place to go, it needs a place to get out into the world, to be something, [laughs] to do good or do evil, whatever. It's stuck! It's stuck in its place, and this I thought was a—

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ALFRED LESLIE: —great opening. So we shot the footage, and then, as it turned out, Denise may have been great in the theater, she was not a person comfortable in front of a camera. Really not comfortable in front of a camera. Plus, in terms of shooting at night in the loft, it was good, but it was noir-ish, and the potential for the kind of beautiful silvery grays that were still possible to be able to see now, to see in the theater, that the cinema was known for—not black-and-white, but silver. In the early screens, with that special screen, 35-millimeter, or 20,000 [laughs] volts or whatever it is, pouring light on—this awesome sight. The footage looked dreadful.

Immediately, the hunt was on for an actress to replace Denise. We had lots of ideas. Robert and I had made an agreement that we would always—when we're working together—I wanted a real partner. I wasn't involved in trying to assert—I always—if someone said, "This, blah blah blah," my idea was always listen, because the cinema is a cooperative enterprise. It's the way of many streams coming together and making a greater stream, a richer stream. And I thought, already, there was a rich stream. Each person in the film brought their own story, and they were there. [00:02:03] That was a hidden subtext in the film itself. So I thought that was great.

So, "What are we going to do about getting another woman?" We kept bringing names up. I remember some of them. I've written it down someplace. I interviewed almost every one of these people, and they came or I met them someplace. And in almost every instance, when it turned out that they were not going to hear their own voice spoken, and to be in a part with totally inexperienced amateurs—with an amateur director and an amateur cinematographer, whose experience is only as a documentary photographer—there was nothing. There was nothing, nothing, there.

So finally, at one point, there was this guy, a painter, who was having a show at the Guggenheim Museum that I knew. I've forgotten his name. But he had married this young actress named Delphine Seyrig, and she had just appeared in this French film. She, from that, carried all of this credential. I did not like Delphine, not at all. I didn't like her from the very beginning. She did not respect me. She was off-put because she was challenged to think that I would be telling her what to do. Who was I to be in this position? [00:04:03] Robert, she knew as a cameraman, and he was Swiss and he spoke French. Maybe he also spoke Italian. Who the hell knows? But there was a cultural affinity, that me, the boy from the Bronx, half-deaf, is not. So I accepted her, though I didn't like her. And during the entire time of the shooting, she was hard-pressed to deal with. I dealt with her, because she hated when I asked her to do something in various scenes.

Because the way that I figured out—once it was decided that she would be the one, I brought together the people that I knew that I had worked together in the theater. One of them was John Robertson, who had been the stage manager when I worked in the summer theater. At one point, John had been working for—in the early version of when that theater that's on LaGuardia—Fourth Avenue. It's a very famous theater. It's still in existence. It's right around the corner from—on Fourth Avenue, right off Astor Place. The one that was famous, off-Broadway—

LIZA ZAPOL: The Public?

ALFRED LESLIE: Public Theater, yeah. There was a time when the Public Theater was holding all their performances up on 120th Street or something, and John was working with them, and I went up and saw Shakespeare, and I went up to all of John's performances, the plays

that he worked on. So I figured that John should come in as our stage manager, and the electrician that I knew that had worked the summer theater could come in. [00:06:09] There were all of these people—the technical people.

So the electrician was—he was great. A little—a guy who came in, and he immediately [laughs] disconnected everything plugged into the main line. He was truly phenomenal. I said, "I don't know how we're going to pay you." He said, "Just find me a loving, overweight woman." He said, "I love fat women!" [Laughs.] This guy. He was great. It was his way of joking. But he was amazing in his facility of being able to make this happen. It worked out—this building on Fourth Avenue had an owner, but the owner didn't give a shit what was going on, so we were able [laughs] to carry on this project with all these people.

So the first thing that happened is that Robert, at one point, was very uncomfortable with the camera, because he wasn't used to using—I forget what it was we were shooting—an Aeroflex. He had never really worked with the camera, and at one point when he was loading it, he broke his finger, and he needed to have someone else to work with. There was a Swiss painter who was also a cameraman, a photographer, who he brought in to work loading and unloading the film, which I was thrilled about because it took that burden off of me doing that part of every—that was going on. So I wrote a list of what people should wear. [00:08:02] You know, just saying, "Come the way you're dressed."

Then what I did, we painted in almost all—when it was necessary, we painted the windows in the back black, so that we could just have artificial light. The electrician worked out a system to put on a booster that would provide more light on the inside of the loft. Robert had this old-fashioned light fixture, which was beautiful for sort of a domestic setting in it, and I had already built a balcony in the studio, where Diana and I slept off the ground, because the ceiling was, like, 13 or 14 feet high. So all of that functioned very well. We had light and everything else. We shot some test footage, and it was simply gorgeous. The tonal range was just beautiful. It was a great lens and everything.

So I had to figure out a way—how to structure this whole thing. Immediately, I realized that it was probably going to be very hard to deal with it the way that I had thought of it originally. I thought, "Well, the best thing to be able to do things is simply get something, something, on film after it all." So I got the third act of the play, and then I just—I didn't have the money to buy a little viewer that would give me the different lenses that I could change to show—change the focal point of the lenses. [00:10:05] So I just cut a little piece of cardboard out, and at night, before we shot each day, I would read through the script, and then I would go around to see where one could be. Because don't forget, this was a small place. It was only as big as this, but only with high ceilings, and it had all this crap around.

So I had cleaned it up, but I was able to create this little viewer. And with the viewer, I figured that it was possible for us to shoot maybe three minutes, the maximum of three minutes, of film every day. I decided that what I would do was aping the way that the readers function in Cuban cigar factories. They would read to cigar workers while they were rolling, you know? I would read what Jack's actors were saying in his play, and then the actors would mouth those words, so it would have some lip continuity if it was ever possible to link Jack's physical—the tape that he had.

So I went to the A&R guy that lived down the street in David Budd's building. He was married to a dancer, one of the main dancers of the Merce Cunningham Company. I played the tape for him, and I said, "Do you think it's really possible to get the quality of this that's good enough, to be able to be used in a film for theatrical"—[laughs] what the hell did I know?—"for theatrical distribution?" [00:12:02] He said, "No way." He said, "This is really terrible." Plus, of course, in the background was all of this music by all of these well-known people. There was no way you could use their music, even though it was in the background, without causing all kinds of problems.

I went, then, to this guy named Tony Schwartz. And Tony Schwartz was a brilliant sound man, but his whole life was formed by his wanting to go around, interviewing people on the street, and asking them their opinion about things. He had a problem about living too high off the ground, so he lived in a place like this. So I played the tape for him, and he said it was impossible to use as it was, in terms of his idea of film quality. But even though he wasn't able to do anything on that film, he became a great resource for me when I was making *The Last Clean Shirt*, because Tony gave me all this sound—what he called effects of sound. The rainstorm, the rain, everything, he was behind that all.

So I constructed this thing, read the script, and every day and night—I would do it at night. Then when everybody came in, it was very hard to control. They all thought it was like a lark. They didn't think that I knew what I was doing, and they all wanted to play games. They all wanted to flirt with Denise. I had decided that Denise should stay in the film, and that she should be a mysterious creature who was just there, just a woman in bed. [00:14:09] She's in bed all the time, in her kimono. It was great. It was a great foundation.

And then I also thought that I needed two other things. I needed a child—there was no child in the original script—because I loved the idea of a child's voice and everything. I decided maybe it would be okay with Mary and Robert, we could use Pablo. And it worked out that we were able to use Pablo. The final thing that I wanted, that I thought was crucial, was to have music in it. And I love organ music. I love organ music. So that when I—Mary had a small organ that I don't know if she actually played it, but it was a small organ that was in their studio. We borrowed that, brought that organ over. I called my friend, Calvert Coggeshall, who was an architect and a painter, who showed it to Betty Parsons Gallery. And Calvert loaned me the sofa. There's that famous scene that we shot of the three guys on the sofa with Alice Neel. So there was the foundation of—everything was set.

With that in place, we just went and shot all of the footage, up to the point which seemed to come to the end of the text that I was following, line by line. Each shot, by the way—each take, I did three times, because I figured probably the first time is the best time, but I figured maybe there's something that happens that's awkward or something that's in the second shot that will be useful. [00:16:11] Because collaging is really what film is about. Persistence of vision. You accept anything that you show the viewer. They go with it.

I knew this guy that I had met once, named Irving Lerner. Robert knew him too. He was a filmmaker, documentary filmmaker. Directed some films. Robert and I went to visit him, and he suggested that we should rent a room where I could begin the editing on the film at this famous place near the Brill Building on Broadway, where all the musicians were. There were all studios that were rented out to people. At that time, there was a transition between the so-called black Moviola and the green Moviola. The difference between them was that the green Moviola was the first Moviola that came in that had the least amount of footage destruction. It was the smoothest operating. It was the best piece of merchandise on the market. You did not want a black Moviola. Now, I had never edited on a black Moviola or a green Moviola in my life, but there was nothing to know about it. All you had to do is make sure you organized all the footage, knew where the cuts were, and so forth and so on.

So we rented this room, and then I went up there. I had to have been there two, three months, every day, all day, all night. [00:18:04] And it was hopeless. I just could not make anything of sense out of the footage. No matter what I did, I couldn't bring it together, and I was really going crazy. The isolation was really hard, very hard, because I was alone all of the time.

One day, I had been working 'til, like, two or three in the morning, and I came into the studio, and the green Moviola was gone, and in its place was the black Moviola. I went crazy, totally insane. And I knew what it was. He had a certain number of green Moviolas, a certain number of black. As far as he knew, I was just an idiot. I didn't know what I was doing. He had better clients, so he was going to give them that. This guy was a soft-spoken Southerner. Nothing against Southerners, but soft-spoken with a deep Southern accent. And I went down, really, a crazed person, sleepless, exhausted, paranoid, truly, and I cussed this guy out. I called him every name. "You motherfucking cock-sucking son of a bitch. I'm going to break up"—I went crazy, and he ran away.

So I figured, "Oh, Alfred, Alfred, what have you done now? You can't back off from a thing like this." So I went back up into the studio to wait, and I knew there had to be consequences. [00:20:02] And sure enough, a few minutes later, he appears with two thugs. Now, mind you, I'm deaf, and my hair is like this. I'm unshaven, and I am out of control. In the editing room is a tire, an automobile tire from Robert's car, his Plymouth wagon—and a tire iron. So these guys come in. They're threatening me. Now, if I had gotten into something with them, they would have killed me. There's no question about it. But consequences did not occur to me.

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

ALFRED LESLIE: I was out of control. I was standing in the middle of the room. There's a

steam pipe on either side, like this, and I was holding this and I began hitting the pipe, back and forth, like *bang*, *bang*, *bang*. And I said, "You fucking guys come here and you touch this film, I swear I'll kill you." I said, "I'll get out of here, but don't you dare touch this fucking film." They ran away. They didn't run away, they walked away.

It was raining out. I called Robert. It was like, I don't know what time at night, before he came. Ten or 11 o'clock at night, in the rain, comes up. We schlep all of this stuff down into his station wagon. We start driving downtown. There used to be a hotdog place, very famous, called Grant's, G-RA-N-T-S, on Broadway, where all the junkies used to go. And prostitutes from the area would come in at night, and they would eat hot dogs and eat shrimp or whatever. [00:22:02]

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

ALFRED LESLIE: We parked the car, soaking wet. We went inside. Neither one of us knew what to do. We were completely at a loss, because I had made a cut that I didn't know how to deal with. It was just lost, and I couldn't figure out what was lost. So we got back—I came back and I lay in bed, thinking, "What am I going to do here?" And I suddenly realized, "Hey, look, you have all this stuff of Jack's. You simply have to restructure it. You just have to start everything and make that whole third act into the whole thing. It doesn't matter if it has no plot. It doesn't have to have a plot. You don't have to have a plot. All you have to do is be able to enter into that moment of these people, each of whom bring in something, and with —if you can get Jack's voice in there, something will begin to happen."

So then Robert, and I think—I think Robert called Irving Lerner. He knew someone else, and we were able to get a space in a negative cutter's studio, a corner to work with. So I decided at that time, what was needed—I decided to reconstruct the framework of the film. I gave it a beginning: guys come in. End: guys go out. Simple. What happens in between, it doesn't matter. It has a beginning, and it has an end, and in between we have beautiful moments. [00:24:00] That's it. That's all we need.

So it came to the thing. Reshooting the footage of them coming in, and some other stuff had to be added. Luckily, there was still some money left. Not enough to finish the whole film, but there was still enough money left for a little more film stock. So we bought the film stock, and we shot this additional footage. We came in, and I made a cut of the footage, and then it began to have some kind of cohesiveness, but it was still empty. It was still nowhere. And I realized that it was nowhere, because the essential for it was Jack.

Jack was the other part. He was the voice. He had to—I had to give him that. But what was he going to give? I tried playing something that I had recorded off his original text, but it didn't fit, and I realized what has to be done is that he has to do it all over again. But what—how could he do it? He was stable and unstable. He was erratic and on time. He was everything and its opposite, in everything that he did. You never quite knew what he was going to do, whether he was high or not high.

By this time, we—Robert and I—had decided to give up on that introduction that we had shot in black-and-white. It was really no good. As I said before, Denise was uncomfortable. [00:26:00] It was mainly black-and-white. And now, the new concept of light in the film was simply beautiful grays. A symphony, really. There's no exaggeration. It was so beautiful. I said, "This is really great. Now we have to deal about the sound. Is it really possible to get Jack to do the voiceover again?" But I could not conceive that Jack would just go into it and read his text over it. I said, "Look, he just has to—let him do it. Just let him give that greatness that he has. Let him make his contribution. He's already made one contribution. This is the critical contribution. As a writer, he will understand the beginning and the end. He'll see coming in. He'll see going out. He'll see in between. Just have to get him in front of it and let him go."

Robert and I knew this sound studio guy. We rented the sound studio, and got David Amram to sit in a sound booth off behind where Jack was sitting, earphones on, and he would play and sing to Jack all of Jack's favorite songs, and Jack would listen to it. And then there would be an audience, and we would scream. Each section, each reel of the film, we would do it three times, and Jack would give a reading. [00:28:00] Of course, the first one [laughs] was the best, and the rest is exhaustion, and the third is—he's already reading as if he's like a little Chinese boy. It was crazy.

But on the day that he was supposed to appear at the studio, he disappeared. No one knew where he was. I don't know who it was—I think it was Mary. I'm not sure who it was. Maybe it was Robert. They called Allen, tried to find out where he was, and somehow we discovered he was high. Someplace in the public library, I think it was. I don't remember. But somebody picked him up—maybe it was Dody—I think it was Dody—found him, and brought him in, and he was high. How high? I mean, this is a guy for whom it was a daily part of his life. I know the mix of alcohol and marijuana or whatever it was that he took—whatever it was, it was congenial. He hadn't reached that point in his life where, later on, it was really hard stuff for him to deal with, and was really deadening.

David began to play into the earphones, and Jack started off, in this tone of his, giving these three readings. At that point, I had the sound to deal with, and with my hearing, it was impossible. How was I going to be able to deal with earphones, doing this cutting of the sound and all that nuances? [00:30:00] It was just simply impossible. So again, I think Irving Lerner or someone else—we found this young film editor who had never worked on a film, basically a commercial film—although calling this commercial is pretty ridiculous—in his life, who had made a short film that he seemed to have a really—name is Leon Prochnik [ph]. Yeah, I think that was his name.

Leon had a nice sensibility, had a nice feel for film, and I thought he had a good feel for what it was that had to be done. So he came in and we sat down together, and we cut the sound together. I couldn't hear what I could hear. He heard, and he was able to make the adjustments and know where to make the cuts, and made that first cut. We had the whole track laid out. This was before we had any of the music recorded.

Now, I had—from my friends Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, who I think I mentioned to you—met Anita Ellis. Robert, as it turns out, knew Anita Ellis also. I don't know how they knew Anita. We went to Anita and asked her to sing this song that David Amram had written. And how that happened was that Allen had told this *fakakta* story that the way he wrote this poem—which I unfortunately told this story on public television. They went crazy. He said that he had written it while he and Jack were masturbating each other off on the Brooklyn Bridge. Well, [laughs] they went crazy. I didn't even know it was live television. I didn't—but it was. [00:32:00]

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

ALFRED LESLIE: So they were very upset. But anyway, it was this beautiful little poem. If you know anything about songs and music, and you know that language is basically—90 percent of the thing is the framework for the music. You get a line, like in that wonderful George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion*, "Who are the every"—you think of every song that was written for that major production of it when it became a musical, is based on a line from Shaw. And the most beautiful lines, lyrically, as you can imagine. "Are you on the street where you live?" I mean, it's like, you can't say it. You have to sing it. The music is in language.

So David picked up this poem that Jack and Allen had. I don't know when it was written. They said it was written 20 years ago or something. He picked it up, and he went, [sings] "Pull my daisy, tip my cup." [Laughs.] He just went down like that, and that was it. Though, the story that he tells, that he took it home and wrote—he may have orchestrated it, and it took more time, but the version of it that was recorded was by a jazz group who—it was my neglect of giving them credit for being the music that was playing behind—the song behind Anita.

So Anita was recorded. We had that. Everything was in place. And then there was the question—it was something that had to do with the music. No, that was it, is the music. We recorded the music. [00:34:00] Yeah, and then that—with the music and Jack's tape, everything began to come together, because—oh, the organ, that's right. I knew I didn't want to forget that.

I had the organ, and I had to figure out how to use the organ. I just figured all I needed to do was to have David sit at the organ, or—"*Da, da, da, da, da, da, da, da*," and off they go! "Up you go, little"—so it was that sound, which still thrills me in any film I watch, or when I hear that sound of the organ. It's such a beautiful sound. It was perfect for that moment when Alice Neel supposedly is sitting at the piano, singing the song for the boys before they run off. Then there was the moment when I thought there was—everything all had this—as I mentioned before, there was in and out. And then, of course, I said, "Look, there's not only in and out, but in film, what you're really talking about is time. Everything has to do with time.

With the elements of time—can take the viewer anyplace you want. All you've got to do is show it to them, and they're eager conspirators with you. They will enter into it."

So I figured, at this point—I set up this shot where the camera goes around, like this, in a circle. And there was a problem with shooting it, because completing the circle took two people, and it was hard for Robert to do it in one take, because he still had his one finger. [00:36:16] So the two of them are there, pointing the camera, and just went around like that, seeing them. The reason I thought of that as a perfect shot for the film, because that could bring in elements of time and the outside. We could enter into the heads of the people who you were seeing by cutting to the outside. This, whatever constrictions there were in everything being in one place, could be opened up by that happening.

So it went around, and then I said, "Okay, now where are we?" Then Robert and I figured we could go out. The place that we both came to exactly was under the Brooklyn Bridge, a place that I knew because I had always been thinking of getting a studio there. It's now called Dumbo or whatever they call it. The people who we got—this was before the bishop and that whole flag scene—this is the bishop in action on the street—was Dody Muller, who was living off and on with Jack; Theresa [ph]—there's an Indian woman in it, who was a very old friend of a friend of mine, who was married to a jazz drummer. Theresa [ph]—I don't remember her husband's name at the time. Theresa, the Indian woman. Mary Frank, and Dody. [00:38:00] I think that Dody, Mary Frank, Theresa [ph] Butcher—

LIZA ZAPOL: Dick Bellamy.

ALFRED LESLIE: And he's on the top, with the flag, waving. I forget who it was who's holding the flag. And they let the flag flicker into its place. It was beautiful. It took a moment to cut. Everything fell into place. But at this point, where everything had fallen into place, all of the elements together, you had this thing that it was coming to an end. And of course, like anything that's coming to an end, you figure [laughs] you don't even know where the end is. You don't know, really, what you've got. In other words, there's something that's got.

So we had to record this song, "Pull My Daisy" song, so we rented this sound studio. Anita came. There was this point at which it was, [sings] "Pull my daisy, blah blah blah. *Ooooh*." That went off faultless. It was perfectly beautiful. So again, this [laughs] nail in the coffin of this thing approaching the conclusion. All these elements brought together by chance, by friendships, by rivalry, by anything that you can imagine that goes on into a project like this—was together. But there was now having all of this stuff recut and then transferred to 35, and there was no money, none whatsoever.

So at this point, there had been enough interest in the film, because each one of these guys—Jack, Allen, Peter, Gregory, Alice Neel—every one of them thought it was their film. And they would tell all of their friends. [00:40:10] Robert would say, "My film." Allen would say, "My film." Everyone saying it's their film. In short, they were promoting it all, just the way people do, out of their own enthusiasm for what they had done. But there was still not enough money to film. Needed at least, for the transfer, the negative, for all of the rest of it to be done and get it into the 35 print, suitable for projection—take another $7,000 or so.

Well, at that point, there was this great film financier, Jack somebody. Very famous film financier who had just been going to a shrink who gave him drugs, and the drugs were supposed to clear his head, psychologically. He was open. Psychologically, he was in open territory to be able to move into an area of the world that maybe he had a hunger for but his business life had kept him out of.

Walter Gutman, who, by this time, thought he was the producer of the film [laughs] went to him and said, "Listen, blah blah. There are these guys. Gee, blah blah blah blah." So this financier, who I never met, sent one of these young people—who were his coworker or someone who worked for him—over. Talked to me, and all of a sudden, we had $7,500. [00:42:02] It was enough money for the completion of the film. Now, because this financier was so famous, immediately, there's a little blurb in *Variety*! How does it get into *Variety*? The financier's helper or whatever, telling them about this project that this guy's involved with. It says, "Blah blah blah is involved in this Beat production" [laughs]—so forth and so on.

Then comes a letter in from Hollywood, someone saying that we have no—the original title for the film was *TheBeat Generation*, which was what Jack had called it. This guy, who was a

producer in Hollywood, had produced a stupid film called *The Beat Generation*, in which there's a, quote, hipster. Do you know the film? Drug addict, rapist, kills people. You know, dangerous guy, blah blah blah. Exactly the characteristics that were embodied in none of the people involved in the film. None of them were bikers carrying chains and beating up [laughs] on people.

So this guy threatened to sue the production if we used the title *The Beat Generation*. So I called Robert and I said, "Listen, blah blah blah. What do you think we call it the first title of the song?" [00:44:00] He said, "That's a good idea." So that was it. It was very simple, because the title was very provocative. People still think that it has a nasty edge to it. And it was sort of sexy. It's sort of indirectly, or directly, or whatever—"pull my daisy," what does it mean? You know, it's nothing. So that was it.

We made a new print. The new print, I had retitled. I had it sent to Consolidated Film Industries in Los Angeles, did all of the printing. Then, when it came back, Robert and I went in and supervised the final—whatever you call it, the print—the settings for the final print to be made. I think Due Art [ph] was still—it was Due Art [ph], not Consolidated. It's either one. I think it was Due Art [ph]. Then Due Art [ph] went out of business, and then I was doing business with Consolidated. Or maybe Consolidated was the company—I think Consolidated was the company that made the blow-up, the 35 in California, and it was Due Art [ph] where the final master prints were struck here in New York.

So then, finally, with everything done, we had a print. I then called up the head of the film department at MoMA at the time, who was very sympathetic. I knew them reasonably well, mainly because I had a strong connection with the painting department, and also because in 1949 or so, there was a teacher's conference, and Tom Guarino and I gave lessons to the teachers who came there in how to make photograms. [00:46:09] And I made a screening of the film that Tom and I had been working on, *Directions: A Walk after the War Games*, in the auditorium for the teachers. The music was supposed to be written. You know who the painter Wolf Kahn is? Well, he had a brother, five or six years older, who was a brilliant guy—five daughters [laughs]—and Peter's wife was the daughter of a very well-known literary critic for the *New York Times*. And there's a little brief story, a side issue.

There was a point in time, maybe in 1948 or '49, when I was still getting my GI Bill money at New York University. I used to walk around with a little funny beard, like you see in that painting of Ralph Carpentier's over there, often with sandals. I mean, like a goofy. [Laughs.] There was this teacher that I was supposed to be interviewed by, because she was going to send me to a place to do student teaching. Well, I had gone there with no idea of ever becoming a teacher. All I wanted to do was collect the money for the GI Bill, to be able to live. That was it. She was outraged, and when she saw me, she said, "You shave that thing off your face! [00:48:05] Do you think I'm going to send you around representing this"—blah blah blah. So that night, I had dinner at Peter Kahn's house, because he was writing the music for *Walk after the War Games*. And his wife was there, plus her father, plus the chairman of the art department, Bob Iglehart.

So Bob Iglehart tells this story about my being rejected from doing student teaching, and the next day, in the *Herald Tribune*, there's a review of the book. The book is called *Beards Through the Ages*, and the first line is, "If the Episcopalians"—the review—"the Episcopalians ever want to get around to investigating some of the newfangled tyrannies"—and tells the story of my being rejected. [They laugh.] And then the school people thought I had set this all in motion, when it was the accident of Bob Iglehart, the chairman of the art department there, with the man who happened to be the book reviewer and a very famous literary critic in the *Herald Tribune*.

So anyway, I knew all these people. They gave us the auditorium in MoMA, to screen the film. I showed it to this audience of all the people who were in the film, plus whoever they wanted to invite. [00:50:00] Showed the film. It was a reel. It was 20 minutes long, something like that. A reel—a wonderful reel, 35-millimeter—and a short reel with it. I don't remember how—28 minutes, something like that. When it was ended, it was like this. [Stamps foot once.] It was like [laughs] a window sash had been broken.

LIZA ZAPOL: Thud.

ALFRED LESLIE: Thud. Silence. Not a sound. It was like, people walked out like this. Every single person had an involvement in the film. And in a sense, I always thought—I was telling

Nancy about—I said, "Psychologically, for each one of them, they had a stake in it, and they had done so much." Everyone had made their contribution. Whether it failed, whatever happened to it, they were a part of it. As far as they were concerned, they didn't know how to deal with it, because there was nothing there.

There was nothing there, but in its way, a film of sensibility, but nothing sentimental. If there could be said, as I—when I look at the film now, and it was commented on by this wonderful Swedish film critic. He said, "The beauty of the film is in its not demanding anything of you. All it does is give. It just keeps on giving." It was a beautiful review of someone who understands some of the aspects of storytelling that has no story, that you bring into it, and there's enough—

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ALFRED LESLIE: —you can use in it. Enough corridors, enough open doors, for a viewer to enter into and come away with whatever they want to come away with.

But among the viewers in the film was this great literary person, a film critic. I've forgotten his name, but he was a really phenomenal guy. He was ecstatic about it. He was laughing the whole time, throughout the whole movie. He got it. He immediately wrote a review, and he said, "The voice of Kerouac is heard all over the land." He got it. And it was because of his comments that people who were fearful of entering into a sensibility which, in its way, was known but unknown, certainly within the history of film—and you see, as I mentioned before, Sabu in *Elephant Boy*. [Laughs.]

I mean, once you see the way that film is made, there's nothing in *Pull My Daisy* that is any different than Sabu was made. Basically, every film that's made is made in the same way. Like when they talk about *Casablanca*—if you've ever heard any of the people talking about how it was made, they say, "We just got the script. We didn't know what was going on. Every night, we would all get together and say, how about this? How about that? And then blah, blah, blah, and then it was over, and we didn't know what we had."

This is getting into process, and the magic of persistence of vision, of that marvelous thing that happens, that we're able to shoot a sequence of still photographs, and by moving, the eye is able to bring them together. They connect into the brain, and they reveal a hitherto unknown thing that exists out there. [00:02:07] So for me, this was a great, enormous—and then it was over.

Prior to that, I discovered, quite by accident, that when Robert was talking about the film, he would always talk about that, "Well, we would just walk into a room, turn on the camera. Something's going on. You point the camera, and that's it." Well, it didn't make any sense. When people would interview me, I would say, "This is a structured event, just like any film. The thing is slated. Every shot was slated. Every shot was"—but all of my original *Pull My Daisy* footage, that first part of the footage, the negative and everything, was in my studio at the time of the fire. How did it get into my studio?

At that point in time, Robert and I had lost whatever there was—as I saw it, lost whatever community [laughs] feeling there was between us. He kept insisting that it was all made up on the spot, there was no script, and that you just walked into a room and people were sitting around, you turned the camera on and shot it. And then I would say something that was totally contradictory. So that was—to say the least, it was very awkward, and not very pleasant, actually. [00:04:00]

So this kept persisting, on and on and on. At this point, Robert did not want to have anything to do with the film at all. He was adamant about not wanting to be thought of as a so-called Beat filmmaker. He did not want to be an underground filmmaker, but he was looking to be like the guy who made *Hiroshima Mon Amour*. He was looking for something else, and *Pull My Daisy* did not fit into his purview of what he imagined could be. What I was concerned about—since we had lost our connection, we had lost what remnants there was of a friendship and Robert was contradicting everything that I would say, it was terrible. I decided what I would do is that I had to go back into my life as a painter now, make films, and I was not able to work with Robert anymore, which is a great disappointment to me, plus the losing of his friendship. I didn't like that at all. I thought it was unnecessary. I wasn't going to start to say "Why?" or whatever.

The film was in his storage area, so I decided what I would do, that in my loft on Broadway, I

had an outside wall. What I did was I bought a steel cabinet, and I hoisted it up off the ground, drilled it in so there was—the ceiling was like 16-feet-high, and the whole ceiling was a skylight. It was an incredible building. I have a picture of the building, 1880. It was an art gallery. [00:06:00] Thousands of people would come on election night to see images projected on the side of a building that was across the street from that studio. So I took the film, in their cans, all of the negatives, the outtakes and everything, and put it into this with my other films that I had been making, and locked it. Figuring that was safety. Because what I was concerned was that the film company that I—would go out of business. Robert did not want anything to do with it. He didn't want to be connected to it. He did not want to be connected to anything that had my name, as far as I could tell, connected to it. He wanted to be seen as the everything on the film.

Part of it was my fault. Because at one point, when it came to writing the credits, Robert came to me and asked if he could share director's credits. So I said sure. I always thought that we should share the director's credit, because it was really our film. It wasn't my film or your film; it was our film. Everybody made a contribution, but both of us had made the major contribution. And actually, Jack—because originally, the thing had been—it was supposed to be a three-way split. Jack a third, me a third, and Robert a third.

But that had all completely broken down. Robert did not want to have anything more to do with the film. So I decided, "I'm going to be turning my attention to working in a different way in relation to film and my paintings. [00:08:01] I ought to know—I can't just leave this film in this vault there, because maybe they'll go out of business, and then what's going to happen? Then I will have lost all of this internal contact that I have with them." So I took the stuff out of the vault, and I put it in this, and locked the door. Then, chance again, the man next door, as I see it, sets fire to the building in the basement, and my—the wall thing is battered by all kinds of things. The case breaks open, stuff falls to the ground.

Unbeknownst to me, around the corner, on 23rd Street, in another building that's on fire, the building where the drugstore is, where the firemen die, is a man named Gjon Mili, G-J-O-N, M-I-L-I. Famous photographer at the time. A member, I think, of *Life* magazine staff or something. Famous for shooting the stop-motion photograph of a bullet coming in, hitting something or other—piece of water. And during the fire, he has been able, through *Life* magazine and his connections, to be able to send members of his staff into his studio to retrieve all of his negatives. So Mili is able to retrieve all of his negatives. I'm not sure whether it was the next morning or a week later. [00:10:00] I'm not sure.

As soon as the building was burned out, and the building was condemned, you could see into the building. And my films, everything in a can, was bolted onto this outside wall. I knew this young guy who was working in Mayor Lindsay's office. Lindsay was an accessible mayor. Not just politicized in a way de Blasio—politicized, yes, of course, but in a different way. He was sympathetic. You didn't have to be a Socialist or whatever. You just had to be an artist. It was good enough for him. So this guy went to him, and I said, "Look, all I want is permission of the city. We can get one of these special fire department bucket loaders, and I'll be in it. They can park outside, and they can push me through. I can open the cabinet and I can take out all my film." So Lindsay said, "I'm sorry, I can't do that, because if anything happens to you, shit storm [laughs] as far as my life is concerned as a politician. I'm responsible for your death. I can't—it's impossible." And that was it. I couldn't take it out.

I think about a week later, on a Sunday morning, I get a call from a young painter named Donald Perlis, P-E-R-L-I-S. He said, "Listen, I'm walking down Broadway, Sunday morning. I see these drawings of yours blowing along on the street." What has happened, without my knowing when: They have knocked the building down, and some stuff there has filtered down, and indeed drawings of mine. [00:12:05] So he picks up whatever he can. Then, eventually, me, him, and some other people who wanted to help me go over. And it's rubble. It's not policed, it's not cordoned off. We're able to go in the rubble, and I am able to pick things up. The very first thing I pick up is my birth certificate, and then there's a picture of my mother. Isn't that insane?

LIZA ZAPOL: It is.

ALFRED LESLIE: And then, I think that morning or the next day, while we're picking through the rubble, Gjon Mili appears. I've never met the guy, but he appears, introduces himself, and he says, "They found this in the rubble. I think it's yours. It's not mine." And it's the perfect 35-millimeter print, original print, of *Pull My Daisy*. So I gave that print to the

Museum of Modern Art. They're not supposed to lend it out, but unfortunately I haven't been able to prevent them from doing it. But in the meantime, I was able to make a digital copy of it, so it's being distributed in a very high-quality, digitalized version.

And about three or four years ago, there was a refrigerator that I had, that rubble that I picked up from the fire, that I never could go through, because it broke my heart. I didn't even want to know what was there. There was all this stuff. Cans of this, that, and the other thing. I picked it up and put it in the refrigerator, and it stayed there for God knows how many years. [00:14:04] Maybe five years ago, or six years ago, I finally [laughs] opened up the door to the refrigerator. One of the cans was the original negative to *Pull My Daisy*. That negative is now with Anthology Film Archives, and is [laughs] undergoing restoration. So that was the trajectory of all that thing, and that's how come I got involved with trying to put the pieces together, and the story of—basically, pretty much, the story.

Unfortunately, all during this time, Robert continued to tell the story that the film was not slated, it was all improvised. Then, one day, after I had found this heartbreaking bunch of stuff, I found little tight rolls of outtakes. Among them was shots [laughs] saying slated—a slate saying "Kerouac scene three." Then he changed his story. Incrementally, each year, he changed his story. It's very sad, but that's the way it is. Nothing I can do about it.

But I found it. And now, I believe—the last thing, after 50 years or so—the last thing I heard him say was, "Yes, of course, of course"—you know, "Of course it was slated." It's just changed with whatever it is that I found. So that was the story of the film. The film now is being restored, hopefully through that foundation, and in a format that will give it existence. [00:16:02] It was entered into the New York—the American—the archive. You know, the national foundation.

LIZA ZAPOL: The Film Archive, yeah.

ALFRED LESLIE: Then when they came to make *The Last Clean Shirt*, I still wasn't through, and I had given up on the idea after having that awful fainting spell that I had when I was thinking of making a film with that infrared film. There was a point that I had this show, the *Four Americans*. This is 1962 or whatever. As I said, my wife, my son, and I went over, and we were treated very well.

LIZA ZAPOL: In Europe?

ALFRED LESLIE: Yeah, to Sweden. Really well. We were introduced to the king. We had a reception with the king. I met the king. I spoke to the king, as Pontus tells about it in there. It was all marvelous. At one point, there was a sculptor that I met. I always remembered his name, and maybe I'll think of it within the next month or so. He was a very gifted guy. He had this big convertible Citroën and he was going to make a big dinner, celebrating the opening and everything, and everybody was going to be out as guests.

Now, in Sweden—I don't know if you know anything about the culture of drinking and driving—you're arrested drunk, you get put in prison doing community service, building the airport or something like that for a period of time. [00:18:01] So people are very careful. And at a party like this, everybody drinks, so they all are not going to drive home. They have made preparation before they get to the party to spend the night somewhere else, either at the house of the host, or at a hotel, motel nearby.

So Lisa—my wife at the time—my baby son Joe, and I are in this [laughs] Citroën driving madly through—to this guy's house, the wind blowing and everything. And I think Pontus is sitting in front. Lisa is sitting behind me or something. All I can hear is that *whoosh* sound, and this—[makes gurgling sound effect]—and I say to myself, "Hey, this is really a good idea for a film! Because I can convert whatever that gobbledygook is into language, into a story." That's how I conceived of *The Last Clean Shirt*. So you want to hear that story?

LIZA ZAPOL: [Nods and laughs.]

ALFRED LESLIE: I had no money to make *The Last Clean Shirt*. That was really complicated. I didn't know what to do. But Sam Francis and I had traded paintings with each other, and I gave him a wonderful picture called *Sam's Crooked Collage*, a big collage, bigger than that thing there. It was really a beautiful work. It's available—somebody owns it somewhere. It's beautiful. People have written about it whenever they've seen it. It's a really beautiful—and he gave me a small painting of his. [00:20:02]

So I called his dealer in Sweden, and I said, "Listen, I need money. I hate to do this. If you buy this from me, I'll have enough money to make *The Last Clean Shirt*." I hadn't had a title for it yet. All I knew was car, person, wind, dialogue, unintelligible, then language. That was the elements that I needed. He said sure. So he sent somebody over, bought it for a couple of thousand dollars. It was exactly the amount of money I needed. I was able to rent a camera. I still hadn't figured out all the logistics to it. I needed a film partner. I needed a cameraman to work with. I did not want to be a camera operator.

All my life of shooting film, I never liked holding a camera. I never liked it, and I still don't. When I would go out filming with Tom Guarino, we would be shooting people on the street. He would do things that were unimaginable to me. He would just go up and put the camera right in their face. Even though—I mean, we would be thrown out of so many restaurants. He would go storming in, camera working, walking [laughs]—he was incredible. He was immune to all of that. I, no way. I couldn't bear it. [Laughs.] He broke the ground, and if it was possible, I would move in after him and shoot.

So I found—there was a painter who had a lot of skills as a cameraman. I talked to him—Buddy Wirtschafter. I had known him from Provincetown. [00:22:03] He was great. He loved boats. He was a very good all-around person. Very sophisticated camerawork. I don't think he ever made a life making photographs, but he was very good at handling, the technological aspects of holding and all the rest. He was perfectly great.

So we rented a camera. I don't know if I told you this story. We rented the camera, and I needed to figure out the structure of the film. I knew this friend of mine, Howard Kanowitz, who was a painter, who had been a lifelong friend of Larry Rivers, and he used to share a loft with Larry around the corner. Howard had a convertible, so I figured I'm going to borrow his convertible. I didn't tell you this story?

LIZA ZAPOL: Not me.

ALFRED LESLIE: I didn't tell it in the other thing?

LIZA ZAPOL: I think you talk about the financing in the other one.

ALFRED LESLIE: I borrowed—I called on a Sunday morning, and Howie said, "You can borrow the car." And his wife at the time, Mary—oh, you know this story?

LIZA ZAPOL: Yes, yes. I'm reminded that in the previous interview with Avis, you talked a little bit about it—mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALFRED LESLIE: Yeah. Okay. So anyway, that's how I got the cast, the woman and the driver. That was the couple, the driver and the woman, in the film. Met them accidentally in his wife's store on Eighth Street, and everything happened after that. Its getting into the film festival was pure chance. [00:24:03] I never expected that to happen. And I was very surprised when all of my friends joined the booing and the hissing of the film.

LIZA ZAPOL: Before we get into the—I'm curious about your collaboration with Frank O'Hara in the—

ALFRED LESLIE: Oh, that was very simple.

LIZA ZAPOL: How it came about, and how you kind of worked—

ALFRED LESLIE: Well, I knew Frank from the moment he came to New York, and I was always sympathetic to his use of language and everything. I always loved it. I loved his attitude, in which you could say anything, do anything, and all you had to do is [laughs] find the right language for it. Didn't have to be stylistically like any particular poet. But he had this vision of language, and it was built into his sensibility.

When I decided to make—after I had shot and had the footage and the dialogue all completely made, I simply went to Frank, and I said, "Look, I made this film. It's all printed, but I need subtitles. I don't care at all what it is you say. I'll screen it for you. All I want you to do is write the subtitles for it. There's a woman who talks, and then there's a man who's thinking. All you have to do is write the subtitles of what the woman is saying in the second reel, and what the man is thinking in the third reel. The first reel will be no titles at all. That's it. Anything you say will work. I don't care what it is. You just do what it is you want to do."

[00:26:01]

It was great, his very cinematic sensibility. He watched films all the time. So I screened the film for him, and he said, "Oh, it doesn't need anything. It's perfect the way it is." I said, "It's a thing the way it is, but I want another thing the way it is." So believe me, it's a question of what is true, what is real. By repeating the same thing over and over again, you get into the viewer's head in a different kind of a way. So I screened the film for Frank a couple of times, and then he just simply wrote the dialogue.

Now, there was an issue that came up with the dialogue, a big issue. The way you put subtitles—do you know how you put subtitles on the film? Sometimes they're printed on a separate track, and when they make the final print they're superimposed. That's an expensive way to do it. The cheapest way to do it—and I found this out from this company, Tetra [ph], who was the big—I think they're still in business—who was a landmark place for subtitling of films. When I went to meet the salesman for it, turned out his wife was an amateur painter. She knew [laughs] my work, and he was ecstatic on being able to work with me. But he couldn't change the prices. So the way it worked, I had to provide a timing sheet, which were things that were rescued from the fire. Every title cost me 25 cents, no matter how long I wanted to keep it on screen. [00:28:07]

So I had X amount of time that the film was, and I had just so much money I could spend on the subtitles. Well, I didn't know what to do. Twenty-five cents is the burning of the title. I figure, well, you normally say keep—if someone is talking and you're trying to have the titles relate to what they're saying, that it's maybe three to five seconds or something like that. But I realized, "Well, I have to find a way to cheat a little bit and extend it a little bit more," because I had so much money that I could use. I had to spread out Frank's titles to fit both reels.

When I did it, I called Frank and I said, "Blah blah blah blah blah." I said, "Look, Frank, I can make this work with the titles that we have, but how about this? Say the woman is going, 'Blah blah blah,' and we have one of your subtitles, and then there's a pause." I said, "I need words. I need words." How about I just put, "She is thinking," or "He is thinking"? In other words, [laughs] fill out one title, that once I have that little—they burned it on the print. Once I have that, I don't have to spend—it's all 25 cents each. Doesn't matter. I don't have to have them do it all over again. For the man, I put in, "He is thinking. [00:30:00] He is still thinking. He is a great thinker," so forth and so on.

Now, unfortunately, that has become politicized, believe it or not. I guess you can imagine. If I asked you, "What could be politicized?"—the Black guy, his subtitles are politicized, because they're saying, "What, are you making fun of him?" So this is really pretty sad. So I made that all, and I wanted always to get rid of all those "He is thinking" things, because I wanted to have a succession. I wanted to have title after title after title. I wanted it to be bombarded in that place, with her thinking, with her talking, with she always moving and everything, and with his thinking.

When that happened, I said to Frank, "Look, give me some notes." He said, "Look, it doesn't matter. Whatever I use, you can choose it as well as I could choose it. Because once it's converted, going from my text into the film, it's just a line. It's still my line, and in the context of the film, it's going to be changed no matter what it is." When I was able to get the digitalized copy, I thought, "This is an opportunity now." That what I can do was go through and find titles of Frank's, because Frank had indicated, in a copy of some of the poems that I had of his, lines that, if we could afford it, to put in. [00:32:06] So at least more than 90 percent—practically all of the new titles that I put in after the first version of the film, in the digital version of the film, had to do with the new titles.

So that was perfect, you know? It was a miracle that I had all of the original stuff to be able to work with. I am not sure, in the reconstruction of *Pull My Daisy*—if they ever reconstruct to restore *The Last Clean Shirt,* I don't know how we're going to deal with, except that the titles that I have now are all Frank's and they're all set in place, so they can be added just as well. That was about it. That was the way *The Last Clean Shirt* was made.

At the reception—I think I sent you that review that was written in London, guy comparing it to the opening of *The Rites of Spring*. It was bizarre, because in the audience, sitting in front of me, was all my friends including Jonas Mekas and Robert and all the rest of them, and they were booing and hissing along with everybody else. So I thought, "Okay, you want to

get into it." But at the same time, I didn't think it was appropriate, somehow. My affection for Hollywood films was something that, from the word go, in many instances, separated me from, for example, Jonas and a lot of the other filmmakers. [00:34:07]

Here's an example of it. There was this guy named Amos Vogel. He and his wife had this group they called Cinema 16. Every month or so, they would find a situation like the high school auditorium, high school for needle trades or something like that. They could rent it, and they had a roster, or people, that were interested in films outside of the Hollywood film. And they would have these screenings. They were the first to screen *Pull My Daisy*, together with Cassavetes's *Shadows*.

Amos called me and he said, "What do you think of my idea? Would you come if I invited, for the next Cinema 16 audience, every filmmaker in New York who was available, anyone who wanted to come? What would you think of it?" So I said, "I don't know if everybody would come." I said, "For you? Of course I would do it. I mean, I don't have any problem with that." So at the event of this screening, which one—the first feature, the first film they were going to show, was an animated film of the filmmaker Robert Breer, if you know who he is. He was a longtime filmmaker. He's dead now. Robert—this particular animated film that he made, his hand drawings, often collages of things. What was special about it, that every frame was a different image. [Laughs.] [00:36:01] There was no succession of frames. Every single frame.

So here is the event. There's something like 40 filmmakers that appear. We're all in the audience. Amos Vogel gets up and is announcing the program, and then he says, "And I have a special treat." Everybody is waiting for the film to start like this, leaning forward, expectation. He stops them in their tracks! He said, "I have as many of the filmmakers that make the films you love here, and I'm going to have them come onto stage now, and you can see them in person." And then, all of a sudden, he says, "Come on up," and we all start parading up, and then people start booing. Saying, "Come on, get—we don't want you guys!" All of a sudden, we're all on stage, and there is this really resentful audience sitting there.

So it turns out that I'm finding myself next to the microphone. Shirley Clarke is by my side, and all the rest of the gang, as it were, are spread all over the stage. Sulking, all in different positions at this thing. Amos turns and said, "Isn't anybody going to say anything?" Me, dope that I am, I said, "I'll say something." And I said, "Listen, I think—you know, you really have the wrong idea about Hollywood films." And that caused a [laughs] firestorm of booing. [00:38:06] Here I was, at a so-called avant-garde film festival, talking about my affection, and telling them they had the wrong attitude—

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

ALFRED LESLIE: —about Hollywood film, they who stood for everything that was anti-Hollywood. So that causes a riot. And Shirley Clarke says, "That's it! That's it! I'm not going to stand for this shit!" And everybody started a formal mutiny, and we all left the stage, and got off and went back to the seats. The audience settles into quiet, simmers down. Darkness, real darkness. And then they're waiting, that anticipation after all that's gone on. And then the first film they show is Robert Breer's film: one frame, each one. And within seconds of its going on, a guy stands up and he says, "Alright! Alright! Let them come back! We'll talk now!"

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

ALFRED LESLIE: I ran into Robert Breer just before he died, and I said to him, "Robert, do you remember this?" And he turned around and he had tears in his eyes. He said, "No one believes me when I tell them." I said, "Of course." I said, "I'll confirm it any time you want. That's exactly what happened."

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.] That's amazing.

ALFRED LESLIE: That was the event that took place. *The Last Clean Shirt*, when it was—*Pull My Daisy* played in Dan Talbot's cinema uptown, on a double bill—I have a photograph of the marquee—with a noir film, I think *Murder, My Sweet*, I think it was. [00:40:09] He played *The Last Clean Shirt*. He said he had to run for his life. He said the people in the audience went crazy, and a couple of minutes into the first reel, he said someone in the audience [laughs] chased him, chased him out of the theater, and he ran, and he said he ran into a local supermarket and hid behind the vegetable counter.

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

ALFRED LESLIE: As I described to you earlier on, the culture around film and the people who were seeing them was very different than this time, though there are still people who cannot watch *The Last Clean Shirt* from beginning to end. It's a test of endurance to some people, and they just can't deal with it. They're waiting for the—whatever it is they're waiting for. So that's what happened.

The Last Clean Shirt is playing now. There's a festival, an exhibition, called *Car Culture in the United States* that's opening in the Middle West in about a month. They're showing a couple of the watercolors of mine that I made on the road. What did I call it?

LIZA ZAPOL: *100 Views*.

ALFRED LESLIE: *100 Views*. And they're screening, continuously, *The Last Clean Shirt*. Whether or not they're just screening the first reel over and over again—I think they'll probably screen the whole thing, because it's going to be on a monitor in the gallery. [00:42:06] So it will just keep going continuously in a loop, and it will really be an endurance [laughs]—endurance project, if you want to call it that.

Now, when I made *The Last Clean Shirt*, the only way that I could deal with a lot of the technical issues, because it was very hard to rent space and everything else to do what I had to do, I used to—every day, I had a couple of knapsacks, and I bundled all of the film elements and everything that I had for things that had to be done. Put them in a knapsack, and I would go up to the 42nd Street Library, on the second floor—it may be still there—the bank of telephones, and I would use that as my office. And then I would call a guy that I needed to have do something on the negative or something like that, and he would say, "Well"—he said, "Call me back in an hour." I would sit there. I would call him back in an hour, and I would end up, like, 10 o'clock at night, I would be going in there. That was the way everything was finally accomplished in getting that made.

And as I said, the screening here was chaotic, but it was screened first in San Francisco, and the audience loved it. I was there, I think. I think—I'm not sure if I was there at the time. I think I was. They loved it, because they had a totally different cinema audience. [00:44:00] And I commented on this in one of the things that I made that are online. I think it was *San Francisco Spreads Her Legs* or something like that, and I commented on the reception of the film community, how sympathetic they were, because they had a lot of offbeat filmmakers in there, working in that area, at time. They loved it. I used to play it often. But most of the time, the people couldn't—it was unimaginably difficult for people to deal with, and they couldn't go through it. It was hard. But I got—the reviews, all of them said—like this one that was in the *Christian Science Monitor*, guy titled it, "What is Truth?" That was—he really came down to nailing it on its—of what it was all about. What is it when you see what is the real thing you're looking at? What is really happening?

I saw something which did not surprise me into how these people were able to present it as a piece of documentary footage. I came across it accidentally. I think it was in a San Francisco or some West Coast newspaper. What it was purported to be: An attack on a man. I don't remember whether he was Black or white. An attack on a man in a subway or a bus. And what it was, that this man sitting in profile. He was like this, and all of a sudden, a hand comes from sort of nowhere, something hits him, pushes him forward, tumbles him, and then pushes him over, and his leg failing and everything like that. [00:46:12] At one point, I was talking about this piece of footage to a group of people that had come here. I said, "What's wrong? Can any of you, from the way I describe it, from what I've said—can tell why it's fake?" So there was silence. I said, "I really don't have enough information." Number one, this has to do with understanding film. The camera never moved. The camera was fixed [laughs] solid. Never moved an inch. It was never out of focus. So what is that? The camera is in place. It's a piece of false information that is trying to make a political point about something or another."

And that's much of what you see today, because I was trying to talk to them about how to read. I urged them all to read this book, *Language in Action* [*Language in Thought and Action*], which I don't know if you've ever seen, by a Japanese guy who writes about language. Hayakawa, *Language in Action*. Talking about how to read a headline, to read what it's saying, see how it directs you into what you think that you know what's going on.

Because I had remembered, during the Vietnam War, that people—I may have mentioned this about people being told what they're seeing. [00:48:00] They tend to believe more than what it is they're actually watching. There was a shot that was coming on the television, of, I guess, a Vietnamese soldier or somebody lying on the ground, and there was a foot more or less on his neck, and a rifle—or a gun, a machine gun or something—pointed down at his head. Then, as this thing—just talking about this, that, and the other thing, all of a sudden there's sort of a lot of jumping around and blah blah blah—and the thing is a cutaway, and the voiceover is saying that the man on the ground tried to escape. Well, I mean, I don't know when he tried to escape, but in that piece of footage that I was seeing, there was a man who could not move, and someone just blew him apart on the ground. So this is what I had been dealing with in terms of issues.

And in Hayakawa's book, *Language in Action*, it deals always with the idea of how to read. It's a book that's written relatively simply, as an introduction to using language for college students. It's a great text.

LIZA ZAPOL: You've talked about the political backdrop to the film, which felt dire and crucial, so I'm wondering—you were talking about Vietnam—if that was sort of a backdrop to *The Last Clean Shirt* in a way.

ALFRED LESLIE: Yeah. Well, it's about—it's truth-telling, in a way. Not that I can tell the truth any better or worse than anybody else, but I try, at least, to be as straight as possible. [00:50:01] In terms of image-making—especially in the culture today, when you have to do with image-making—I find that most people don't know how to read, they don't know how to look. Their abilities to perceive things are shaped entirely by the television, and almost all of these television stations have a political view that's as sharply focused as *The Guardian* is as a so-called left-wing newspaper in England, and is something else. It's just that everything is focused on making you as commented on, and telling you what's going on before you really find out what they're saying.

Now you see in the *New York Times*, it says, "What you need to know about in order to do this or do that." What the fuck are they doing? "What you need to know about." I mean, that's crazy. That's not journalism. Then they have a thing, that after Trump was elected, they said, "If you feel unhappy"—I mean, this is for real—"If you feel unhappy, we have a special room that you can come to online and talk about your feelings." What? What is that? I'm not talking about Left or Right. I'm not talking about good or bad. That's not—what the fuck is that? That is purely the formal propagandistic use of the media. You see it on the television. I listen to the fucking machine all day long.

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ALFRED LESLIE: And then sometimes I'll listen to—on this set here, gets New York One. This guy gets on, and before he tells you what's going on, he explains to you what it is that's going on. It's a perfect example.

The saddest example, for me, is this guy who was selling cigarettes and was killed about five years ago. Have you ever seen the footage?

LIZA ZAPOL: Mm-mm [negative].

ALFRED LESLIE: You see the footage. This is my remembering of the footage. Here is a guy who looks to be about six-foot-six, and weighs maybe 300 pounds. This is one big human being. He is selling cigarettes on the street, and the police are trying to stop him. So immediately, you say, "Okay, here is a person selling cigarettes on the street. He knows that he's not supposed to be selling cigarettes on the street, right off the bat." So if the police come and say, "Listen, would you please move on?" why are you going to fight with them? Give me a break. When I was a child, my father would kill me if he saw me eating an ice cream bar on the street, because there were people who were manufacturing ice cream bars in the back of stables, and they would sell for three cents apiece, and children were being poisoned. What do you know about where, in our culture today, and in the way that things are done, where do you know where this guy's cigarettes are coming from? Not that he's doing anything purposefully, but knowingly, this man is doing something which, according—so why are you doing it? [00:02:00]

If the police ask you to move, why don't you just simply say okay? Why are you going to fight with them? That, to me, is my point of view. Why are you going to fight with them?

Unfortunately, in the footage that I saw, one of the policeman, who—I don't even know if they were real policemen, but sort of adjuncts or something, seemed to be about five-foot-two and weighed less than I do, maybe 120 pounds. Standing next to him, it was like an elf. So for this guy to try to stop them, he gets behind him and jumps up into the air, and grabs on him like this to pull him back to try to stop him. The fucking guy dies, is killed. It's a terrible thing. But who, when you really examine all of the facts—how does this thing happen? I mean, how has this happened?

This morning before you came, I'm looking at this picture on New York One, and there is a man walking down the street, and then there's a young woman and a man walking. And all of a sudden the young man breaks away to this man, beats him unconscious on the street, and then he and this girl walk away. What was it about? There is a certain kind of attitude of prevailing violence that exists, that's in its way encouraged by a certain kind of literacy. And I see it as plain, ordinary lack of understanding of the media, and the way the media tends to report it is almost always politicized. [00:04:03] This, to me, was a perfect example of a misrepresentation. This is not to say that this man—it was terrible that this man died, but this is not to say that he could have walked away from this at any moment. What was at stake?

LIZA ZAPOL: Right. So in terms of—

ALFRED LESLIE: This is what I mean by political.

LIZA ZAPOL: Yes, right. Political around *The Last Clean Shirt*, political around how we view—

ALFRED LESLIE: How we view events.

LIZA ZAPOL: —events and truth.

ALFRED LESLIE: How we read them, and what is language, and what is being said, and do we really understand what's being said?

LIZA ZAPOL: And do we really understand each other?

ALFRED LESLIE: Exactly, yes. And that's why, when Barbara Rose wrote this thing, and called it a humanist—when I—

LIZA ZAPOL: Called you a humanist.

ALFRED LESLIE: Yeah, and I thought, "Me, a humanist?" I don't know if I told you the story about the guys in the elevator.

LIZA ZAPOL: I think you did, in the previous interview with Avis Berman.

ALFRED LESLIE: Yeah. My wife said, "Of course."

LIZA ZAPOL: You put yourself at risk.

ALFRED LESLIE: Yeah. "What are you doing, putting yourself at risk for this?" My knees are a wreck, so I had to go to see this doctor. Took all these X-rays and everything about my knees. I was talking to her, and I was describing to her this filmmaker, this writer, this Danish guy I mentioned to you, who made this film called *Eskimo*.

LIZA ZAPOL: Oh, yes, yes, yes.

ALFRED LESLIE: Peter Freuchen.

LIZA ZAPOL: Off the record, last Friday, you talked about—

ALFRED LESLIE: Yeah, Peter Freuchen. Woah! You don't even know where a human being like this comes from. [00:06:00] This is one incredible creature. In the issue of what Freuchen did—was totally magical in terms of his contribution, in terms of understanding the culture and what was happening, to how these people were being displaced. Like even now, when we talk about this issue of immigration and everything else, there is so much confusion, deliberately. The issues being deliberately misrepresented, either by the illiteracy, by the lack of literacy on the part of the person who was talking, either deliberate or they just don't know what the hell is going on. Because the things that they say make no sense,

no sense at all, in terms of what they're talking about. People's representation of it, when you read about it.

So these are all the issues that I think about. I don't know how to address them. I don't. I have no idea. The only way I know how to address them is to make these dumb little pictures the best that I can. And somehow, I have some kind of sense that within the framework of it, that something—it will draw someone in and enable them to move on to another place. I mean, that's the way I was brought up. I never knew that's the way I was brought up, but when I think of how I was brought up, that's the way I was. It was to examine the situation, take people as they come. [00:08:00] To try to not second-guess what is going on. To just to try to face the reality, to go out into the world. And that is essentially where I've placed these paintings.

And the difficulty I had, as I was saying earlier, in terms of moving into my position as an abstract painter, into being a so-called realist painter, in the world of people not even knowing what a realist painting is, is crazy. Because right now, anybody who makes a certain kind of painted image that is too so-called naturalistic, they are shunned. Whereas, depending upon the ethnicity or something else that is going on within the contents of who the maker is, they think it's great.

What I recollect in my life was how controlling the Communist Party was, and the Left was, at the end of World War II, saying that there were works of art that you could make, and there were works of art that you could not make. I remember a bartender that I knew from the Cedar Bar coming over to me one afternoon, in 1949. "You need a job, Alfred?" He knew I did. He said, "I've got a great opportunity for you. There's a German restaurant around the corner. We need someone to park cars. All you have to do is stand outside. You get three meals if you want, and you get the tips from the people. They drive up, you take their car, and you park it around the corner or in this"—I said, "That's the greatest thing that I've ever heard. [00:10:05] Woah! This is my idea of heaven. You mean, I can eat, and I get paid for it? [Laughs.] This is great." He said, "You've got to come over and meet with the owner of the restaurant." I said sure.

So the next day, or a couple days later, I go over and I meet the owner. Big guy, blonde. And I see when I'm there, there's a set of barbells on the floor. Immediately I go into my routine. I said, "Hey, you work out? Blah blah blah." I said, "I used to be a gymnast. Blah blah blah." I pick it up. I show him. I do this, that. I stand on my hands and I walk around. We have this whole conversation. And then I leave, and he says, "I'll get back to you," and I figure I didn't get this job. Why not? I mean, all I had to do was stand outside, park the cars when they come. He lifted [laughs]—about a week later, I go up to the guy at the bar again. He said, "I'm sorry." He said, "It's not that you're Jewish, but he doesn't want anybody who looks Jewish to be standing outside this restaurant." [Laughs.] This is 1948 or '49! [Laughs.]

LIZA ZAPOL: Wow.

ALFRED LESLIE: I'm not going to tell you the name of the restaurant, but you could guess it. [Laughs.] It was just one of those things, like the story I told Avis about what happened to me when I was in Panama City. Where are these people coming from? So you see, it's all a question of the miscalculation of the dynamics of different cultures. I appear, out of the blue. I am going to upset the apple cart, you know.

LIZA ZAPOL: On Friday, you told me a story about when you were in Panama City, Florida, and you were—[00:12:08]

ALFRED LESLIE: That was that story when they wanted to kill us.

LIZA ZAPOL: Because you were read as African American, as Black—

ALFRED LESLIE: They thought I was passing for white. It was as simple as that. My friend, Leon Kuniansky [ph], Alabama-born, said, "All you had to do is tell them you were Jewish." He said, "Then they just would have shunned you." [Laughs.] Grew up in Alabama. A question of—not politics. It has to do with language, and understanding that in a country as big as this, every time you move from one place to another, you're really moving into another culture, a different kind of a culture. The paintings that I make, that can be seen readily and easily in one part of the country, can't be seen readily and easily in another part. What the people in Youngstown, Ohio thought of these so-called literary works of mine, I have no idea. What the people in Texas thought about it. But I do know that no one in New

York seems to have any interest in them at all. So culturally, there is a big disconnect.

Apparently, there's, what, a tinge of conservatism? I made a picture that is in the collection of the Hartford Museum of Art, the Atheneum. It was made just at the height of the Vietnam War. This was a time I thought, "Gee, Alfred, do you think you could go over to Vietnam and be a reporter in the field, making drawings? [00:14:00] That's crazy! Why are you going to do that? That's not your cup of tea. You can't do it. Plus, the fact is, you've got all these people with a camera, running around, taking all the pictures that are necessary. You have to address this in another kind of way." So I thought, "What kind of a picture could be an anti-war protest picture? What?"

My oldest son, Joe, had a school chum whose father had been in Vietnam. I said to him, "Hey, listen, do you think your father still has his uniform? Ask him if I can borrow it." Guy says yes. So then I call, I get the uniform at my studio. He's a big man. I call up the bottle [ph] monitor at UMass. I was living in Amherst at the time. Blah blah blah. Sends over a kid, about [laughs] skinniest thing you can imagine. Looks like he's 14 years old. I put the uniform on him, and I said, "That is the saddest thing I've ever seen in my life." I said, "There's an anti-war protest, this baby in a [laughs] soldier's uniform." It's what George Bernard Shaw is saying, that the old people send babies in to fight their wars. So I went up on the roof of where I had my studio at the time, one of the studios I had on 13th Street, and I made some drawings in the background. That landscape of buildings and everything would be where I decided to put this couple, this man, and then I decided he should have a sister. [00:16:09]

This story that I'm telling you will describe to you how I go about constructing a picture. So first off, you can see that I had this idea for a so-called anti-war picture, without really knowing what it was going to be. What is an anti-war picture? Okay, for some people, I had to make a picture of someone chopping someone's head off. Someone blowing someone's brains out. Someone screaming on the street. I didn't know where I was going with it, but all I knew now was that I had a baby-faced 17- or 18-year-old child, boy child, and a uniform that would fit a person two feet taller and 80 pounds heavier. When I put this uniform on this kid, it was pathetic. So I figured that is where the story lies, but I still did not know what it was all about, except that it was about children being pushed into a position where they have to fight these wars, for all the various reasons that are concocted. Myself being one, because I went into World War II. I was ready to do whatever they wanted me to do.

So I made, first, this drawing of this guy wearing the uniform. And then I just had him. I had to say, "Okay, here I have a perfectly nice drawing of a child wearing a grown-up's uniform like it's a Halloween costume or something. Where is this taking place? Is he standing by a roadside? [00:18:00] Is he in a gasoline station? Is he in a field, where there are things growing? Where is he?" In other words, it was a place of the context for it. That was the point in time that I decided on the view from my roof on 13th Street. At the time, the World Trade Center towers were in my view from that point, so when I made the drawing, the Twin Towers were there. So when I made the painting, he's standing up there, and in the background is the city of New York and the Twin Towers.

So then I thought, "This guy has to have a sister." So I find another sitter, make a separate drawing of her, put her in civilian clothes that I buy in a local supermarket, sort of shabby type clothes, and then I put a valise down with her. She's in civilian clothes, but on the valise that she's carrying, it says her name, Sergeant so-and-so and so-and-so. So she's in the military also, and she's also a child. But given that she has the same name, you don't know whether she's a wife or a sister. You don't know what their relationship is.

Then I have mixed in, don't forget, these two people: one in uniform, one in civilian clothes. And then, in the background, there is the Twin Towers. But at that time, the Twin Towers are nothing but the Twin Towers. They didn't carry any political, so-called, message or anything else with it. Then, on the rooftop, on the ledge of the rooftop, I put some informational tidbits. [00:20:01] I put a hamburger, French fries, and I put a little package of books wrapped with string. On it was the record cover of *Hotel California*. You know the lyrics to that? "Go to Hotel California, blah blah blah." To me, all of those are artifacts of our contemporary culture. As the painting has aged, because of the Twin Towers being there, I thought that this has accumulated a greater resonance than it had just by chance of the destruction of these two buildings and the deaths of all those people. And all of those pictures, all of those elements that I put in, are all clues. They're like little salt and peppers, little spices that you put in, things to lead you someplace. I don't know where it's going to

lead the viewer, because I don't know who the viewer is.

But I do know that when the painting was bought, it was bought by the then-director of the Atheneum, who thought I was the greatest exponent of academic painting in the country. Well, to me, it looked nothing like that could be vaguely thought of as an academic painting, but I thought, "Well, nothing to do about it." It entered the collection, and apparently it was loathed. [00:22:00] When the guy left, it was loathed. It was never shown again. It disappeared [laughs] into, I guess, the basement.

Recently—about four months ago, five months ago—I was in a show with an early abstract painting of mine, called *Pink Square*, at the Peter Freeman Gallery. A beautiful, beautiful painting that was rescued from destruction by a dealer, Tim Hill, in the Middle West. It was incredible, all the work, conservation work, that was made to bring it back to life again. It was really a beautiful painting. It was a big part of the show. Peter loved it. The show was reviewed. Every time the show was reviewed, someone commented on the beauty of *Pink Square*. It was—I had nothing to do with it, in a sense. It was a miracle, one of those things that happen.

At the opening, Peter gives this big dinner at this restaurant, the Lafayette Restaurant, over on La Guardia Street, or Lafayette Street—Second Street and Lafayette or something like that. This woman comes over, and very earnestly talking to me about my work. Very appreciative. Loves the *Pink Square*. She's there with her husband, and blah blah blah. [Laughs.] It's so pathetic. I said, "Where do you work? Where are you at?" She said, "Oh, at the Hartford Atheneum." I said, "Oh, wow. [00:24:00] You know, I had the strangest experience with the people at the Atheneum."

Little did I know that the person who was responsible for the bad feelings surrounding their ownership of the painting was the person I was talking to. You hear me, girl? The minute she discovered that I was the artist who painted that painting, she wanted to have nothing more to do with me. [Laughs.] So you can try to grasp what the meaning of all that is, what sense that it all meant. I'll send you a picture of the painting.

LIZA ZAPOL: [Laughs.]

ALFRED LESLIE: What sense of this poor creature. What can you say?

LIZA ZAPOL: I'm mindful of time and your time right now, but—

ALFRED LESLIE: Listen, whenever you want to stop. Maybe we're at the end, I don't know.

LIZA ZAPOL: I don't think we're at the end, but I think we might be at the end for today.

ALFRED LESLIE: Okie doke, I'm with you.

LIZA ZAPOL: Would you be willing to continue tomorrow or another day?

ALFRED LESLIE: Let's give ourselves a week in between, so I can go to the bathroom. [They laugh.]

LIZA ZAPOL: You've shared so much, and there are so many themes in what you've shared today. I'm aware also of—you know, you shared with me *The Hasty Papers* and your literary work and writing, and I feel like we need—it would be great to talk about that, as well as some of your key relationships and friendships with Frank O'Hara. You touched the tip of the iceberg here, but of course we have *The Killing Cycle* to talk about. [00:26:00]

ALFRED LESLIE: Yeah, of course I'm willing to do it. It's valuable to me, because in constructing all of these threads, it's just great. Maybe I'll be able to sell a painting as a consequence. [Laughs.]

LIZA ZAPOL: Great. Great.

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