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Interview with Wolf Kahn

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Transcript

Preface

This interview is part of the *Dorothy Gees Seckler collection of sound recordings relating to art and artists, 1962-1976*. The following verbatim transcription was produced in 2015, with funding from Jamie S. Gorelick.

Interview

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is Dorothy Seckler interviewing Wolf Kahn in New York, on September 17, 1968.

Wolf, I would like to ask you first about your early life, where you grew up, what kind of family it was and anything about your early childhood that might have a bearing on the kind of artist you became.

WOLF KAHN: I've just been thinking about the last thing you were talking about recently and I was talking about a certain aggressiveness and hostility that characterizes the big guns in the New York art world like somebody like Oldenburg who was very cruel in his work and at that same time he has humor. Somebody like Rivers who's got this sort of insidious, malicious kind of thing going with his pencil, or his brush. And the same thing with even Bill de Kooning. He's got a terrific sensitivity, but it also has a nastiness about it.

And this is something that you take any—especially now with somebody like Warhol or Dine, these people, the hostility is so apparent. The cruelty is so apparent in their work. And I was saying how I myself have none of this quality. I can't feel it.

I despair ever becoming an important artist in 20th century America because that seems to be one of the things that's almost essential that the artist be able to in some way express the hostility that people seem to feel and expressing it more directly. And most people dare to express it especially people who are involved in the art world who are fairly pacific people on the surface.

Lester and I were saying that we're really a different breed altogether. And I especially feel I'm very mild. I want to make friends with my art rather than—I try and keep meanness out of painting if it ever crops up.

I think that comes from my childhood where I grew up in Nazi Germany as a Jew. And when I was a seven year old boy, between the ages of seven and 11, I didn't dare to go out on the street hardly because I was afraid of the hostility that would greet me being out on the street.

I feel maybe this explains this one quality in my work of which I'm very conscious which I sometimes even dislike, a kind of a tendency to be agreeable, to be gentle as an artist.

But there are of course other wonderful artists whose work I like a lot like Avery, Morandi, Edwin Dickinson, and people in America. But among the new breed of artists, you find very little of that I'd say.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Wolf, in Germany, what years were these that you were—was Hitler in power at that time?

WOLF KAHN: Well, I was born in '27. And I remember when I was five years old I was staying with my grandmother, who was living near the university in Frankfort. There were student battles. I remember looking through the closed jalousies. In Germany, the houses when things go wrong the first thing they do is close the jalousies.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Are they like shutters?

WOLF KAHN: Well, yeah except they go on rollers.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

WOLF KAHN: In Europe they have them on store fronts and so forth.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

WOLF KAHN: Everybody on the streets had their jalousies closed, but I heard these shots outside. And I thought they were playing soldiers or something. And I looked out and I saw a student falling down in a student uniform and so forth, blood. And that's one of my first memories actually that I still have. And then I lived there until 1939, two weeks before the war began. And then I left Germany on a children's transport to go to England to an unknown destination with just a volunteer family. At that time, the Joint Distribution Committee was organizing these homes for German Jewish children because everybody knew the war would break out momentarily. So I went on children's transport with a tag around my neck and a number and so forth.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And separated from your family.

WOLF KAHN: Yes, and I kissed my grandmother goodbye. It's the first time in my life that I ever saw her cry and for good reason because she was killed in a concentration camp later on.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What happened to your father and mother at this point?

WOLF KAHN: Well, my mother died when I was quite young. My father remarried a German woman who was quite hostile toward us children. I had two brothers and a sister. I was the smallest, the youngest, so I was sent off to live with my grandmother. But my father later on divorced her.

My father was a conductor of the Stuttgard Symphony Orchestra. Of course, he lost his job the day that Hitler took power. And he traveled all over the world, first to Rome and to Havana, and various places like that and to America to conduct. And he was a pretty successful man in Germany, but doesn't have the kind of personality with which you get ahead in this country. So he finally settled for being a college professor at Montclair State College where he stayed, I think, for 25 years. He used to say he's a man with the great future behind him.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I met your father. He's a charming man. Then what happened once you were in England?

WOLF KAHN: In England, I lived first with a professor at Cambridge, a professor of constitutional law, who was very upset with me because I didn't correspond to his idea of what a refugee should be.

First of all, I was fat. He thought a refugee should be thin. I spoke English because I had an English governess. I grew up in a very well-to-do household. And he thought refugees shouldn't speak English. He wanted to teach me English I guess.

And I was just wrong. My rival was heralded by the arrival of a big trunk and a bicycle and a stamp collection which were the only things that I could take out of Germany. You wouldn't take out any money. But you could take out like this stamp collection. If it was worth less than $50, you could take it out.

I was an 11 year old boy. So these things were sent out and could go to England. And he didn't like all that. So he treated me very badly. The first two months in England were absolute hell for me.

He had four children who immediately understood, four little girls. They immediately understood that I was on their father's shit list and put bugs in my bed and toads and did all kinds of bad things. [Laughs.]

And then of course being under a cloud like that, I did everything wrong, too. If I was working in the garden I stepped on newly seeded flowers and so forth. [Laughs.]

So I was miserable on all sides. And finally the committee there found me another home and much less well-to-do people. And I lived there much more happily for another seven months. And by that time my father could get me over to America. I came here when I was 12.

[Audio break.]

WOLF KAHN: Oh, no. Peter and also Peter lived in the city in Stuttgard which was much less anti-Semitic than Frankfort. I mean like terrible things happened in Frankfort.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

WOLF KAHN: I was beaten up on the street. I was taken to a depot where the concentration camp train took people. But in typical German thoroughness they had a list and they found out that I was underage. But I really thought I was going to the concentration camp.

An SS man with a drawn carbine came into our apartment. Meantime my cousin from Cologne was hiding out in the attic. And my grandmother in some kind of a—I mean she had this old-fashioned idea that there's two kinds of world. That's the adult world and the child's world. And all troublesome things should be kept away from children because they weren't able to cope with them.

So I thought that everything was sweetest and light all the time. And still in the background of all this was this Nazi thing that was so big that you couldn't possibly escape from it or keep it out of a child's consciousness because as soon as you were out of the shelter of your house it immediately hit you.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What about school?

WOLF KAHN: Well, in the beginning—things constantly got worse—In the beginning I went to a state school and we used to get beaten up in the school yard. And then there was a law that Jewish children couldn't go to state school anymore and then they had a Jewish school, a very good Jewish school, in Frankfort that I went to then. First, it was a Jewish class and then we went to a Jewish school, the whole class.

But then you got beaten up. The Hitler Youth would wait for you on street corners because they knew where the Jewish children went. It was a big thing, very patriotic thing to beat children up. And then the day after the famous Kristallnacht. It's what they called when they burned down

synagogues and so forth after this Jew killed a German military attaché in Paris in November 10, 1938.

The day after that I got beaten up by a group of adults. My bicycle was broken. I was going over to my friend's house. I was very pleased because school was out. All the teachers had been taken to concentration camps.

And I thought it was a lark. We could play tin soldiers for two weeks or something like that. Kids, they have no sense of the gravity of things.

But I got beaten up going over to my friend's house by adults. A gang of men broke my bike, knocked me down. So I went home crying. My grandmother tried to comfort me. It was a big mess. It was a horrible time.

At the same time, what I remember is such a mixture of things. I remember going out on trips into the Taunus Mountains outside of Frankfort and going out to see my relatives who were all well-to-do people living in country houses.

One of them, my uncle, for example, my great uncle who was a painter had a beautiful house in Auerbach on the Bergstrasse which was near Darmstadt. And we used to go out there and visit him and see his garden and see his paintings and things.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What years would this have been?

WOLF KAHN: This must have been maybe '36-'37.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Word had gotten to them.

WOLF KAHN: Yes, it really got bad in '38-'39. And that's when the really bad things started to happen.

And then I remember when the concentration camp people got sent back from Buchenwald. Our teachers' school started again, but they all had white hair and some of them didn't come back. It was a mess. Nobody talked about it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: When were they sent back?

WOLF KAHN: Three months later. We didn't have school for three months.

DOROTHY SECKLER: This was what period?

WOLF KAHN: This was in '38 from November. They were taken I think. It was supposed to be protective custody. This is all historical that all the Jewish males in Frankfort were taken between the ages of 13 and 60 or something like that and taken to Buchenwald which is a horrible concentration camp near Nuremberg.

And the teachers all came back. Nobody would say a word. They didn't know anything about it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It's so strange that they were—I didn't know anyone ever came back.

WOLF KAHN: Oh yeah. This was supposed to be protective custody from the wrath of the German people, the righteous wrath of the German people.

Anyway, I'm still pretty anti-German as a result of this. I can't ever—When I meet Germans I generally have to have it out with them first before I can have any kind of relation. We talk about—If I feel any kind of tension on their parts about this time or any kind of self-righteousness, I immediately let them have it which is probably bad on my part.

On the other hand, like we were in Italy—when I was living in Venice, we decided let's get over this thing and go to Germany and retrace the steps of our childhood. It's no good to live with hate and so forth, idealism.

So we went to the station and we were going to go to Munich. And we just decided—then I heard some German spoken and I just decided I didn't want to go to Germany right there. I couldn't buy a ticket. So I went to Vienna instead. Of course, then I found out later the Austrians were even worse than the Germans. [Laughs.] But still at least it wasn't—I felt I'd made some kind of a choice.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, that's very understandable. But this experience has never registered in your work in any way.

WOLF KAHN: Who knows? I think every brush stroke means something that you do.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

WOLF KAHN: I mean one reason for painting being as important an art as it is as against let's say light shows or neon light sculpture is because it's so direct. Everything you do is so autobiographical. You know it carries such a weight of associations.

And somebody who can read the language of pain can tell, can tell what kind of a personality is behind it. And we all take it for granted that a personality is molded by things that happened to you. So I imagine somebody who is very astute can see some of those things in one's work. Perhaps certainly in the history of one's work finally.

And anyway I think most artists don't paint what they are, but they tend to paint something more devious like Van Gogh. I mean he didn't paint the madness that was in him, but it came out anyway.

But he painted what he loved like sunflowers and things. The only thing that gives us an inkling of this madness isn't his subjects certainly. But it's the intensity with which he attacked it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

WOLF KAHN: I don't want to be conscious of things like that in my own work. I think to be too self-conscious is very anti-productive, counterproductive as the doctors say, in artists.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But you're in any case not conscious of repressing or excluding let's say a fearsome—

WOLF KAHN: Well, I know one thing about my paintings. They have a—I'm always most comfortable when I'm painting something that's fairly lonely. That's a kind of a lonely kind of image, an image without people. I don't know where I put people in my paintings anymore.

In pastels, sometimes I still can do it. But in paintings I don't know what to make them do. I don't know what aspect they should have, whether threatening or friendly or what. I'm just—I'm an anti-social kind of painter maybe in that sense.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Perhaps you're a pro nature kind of painter. When you were—

WOLF KAHN: Yes, that's of course something also. That's very German.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

WOLF KAHN: You have kind of—A German grows up normally with a kind of terrifically intimate, romantic feeling about nature, trees and fields and farms and so on which may be sentimental or not depending on how deep it is. At the height of the romantic period was something beautiful when you think of Schubert's songs about nature.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. When you were a child, were you aware of going not necessarily into deep country but into whatever countryside was nearby and finding that a comforting experience?

WOLF KAHN: Well, comforting I don't know. It was just an exciting experience. We used to make foot walks trips.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

WOLF KAHN: Hikes I think in the mountains, into the woods. And at the end there was always a restaurant or something. I mean in Europe all these things are very much more a part of the weekend life you might say of city dwellers.

Whereas here I think there is a different idea about nature. It's the idea of the wilderness that exercises Americans. They want to get to somewhere where no man has ever trod. And it gives a whole different scale to American landscaping which interests me, too. But I can't connect with it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, it's a different scale.

WOLF KAHN: But I don't want to overdo this European thing because there's something about American painting that I'm extremely interested in which is a kind of emptiness.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

WOLF KAHN: That I like a lot.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Before we get to that though, I was going to ask you. When you were in child in Germany, what painting or what art works in general did you see around you?

WOLF KAHN: Well, there was the museum in Frankfort, the Städelsches Kunstinstitut which had Rembrandts in it and early German primitives and Rubens there, too.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What did you like best that you saw there?

WOLF KAHN: Oh, I suppose like most kids I liked everything that had murder and mayhem in it, you know.

[They laugh.]

I wasn't much of an art lover except my grandmother had paintings in her house. And I was always encouraged very much. I drew very well ever since I was very small. I remember when I was five years old I made a picture of the band in the botanical gardens with every instrument.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was music important to you?

WOLF KAHN: Well, I grew up in a musical household also.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

WOLF KAHN: My father although he was far away the idea that he was a conductor was certainly kept ever present.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But you never thought of becoming a musician yourself.

WOLF KAHN: No, and in fact my father had had some difficulty in choosing whether to be an artist or a musician. I don't think he ever had any difficulty in choosing not to be a businessman which I suppose would have been very good if he had been. [Laughs.]

But he was pretty good in drawing also. And so was my mother. And my mother was also wrote poetry. She was in general a very—from what I heard, I never really knew her—extremely gifted person and involved in all sorts of avant-garde manifestations like anthropomorphism and modern music. Her parents had a Picasso hanging in their house and so on which in those days was very wild.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. And this uncle that you visited sometimes, did his being an artist affect you very much? Did he become someone you'd like to identify with?

WOLF KAHN: I didn't know him that well. And he was also too old. But my brother used to come and visit me, not regularly, but once a year. So my brothers and my sister came up. And he drew all the time. And we had a rivalry kind of thing going from the very earliest days.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How much older is he than you?

WOLF KAHN: He's six years older. He was immensely more accomplished than I was. And I used to try very hard to do like he did. And he was my big hero until he got drafted in the American Army. And then he went away and I took a job that he had had as a commercial artist's assistant. I was in high school still and I worked after school and on Saturdays.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Just to fill in that little bit of time when you first came to this country, how old were you then?

WOLF KAHN: Twelve.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You were 12 and Peter was 18.

WOLF KAHN: He was 18, yes. And he had a job then in a factory. But we all lived together. It was a very idyllic period for a short period of time. My father had recently divorced from this horrible stepmother. And everybody felt like a tremendous weight had been lifted.

And we all lived together in this big rambling house in Montclair, New Jersey. And my brothers—I'd just arrived and they looked me over and they decided I would never do—I had to learn to throw a ball. I had to learn how to box. I had to learn how to high jump. And I had to become an American boy they thought.

So this was a whole program. And Peter and I slept in the same room and he was sort of my god.

And he told me not to let any men pick me up in passing cars and so forth even if they offered me candy and so on. [They laugh.] And he was just the walking example of sophistication and worldly knowledge as far as I was concerned.

And then he of course was very responsible to this idea on my part and did his best to live up to it. And he used to take me to New York. And I remember once when he was first drafted we met in New York.

He planned a big day. In the morning we went to a museum. And we had lunch in a French restaurant on 50th Street or 52nd Street. And in the afternoon we went to the Latin Quarter to see a floor show and all this. And poor Peter didn't have any money. But I mean he spent it. Where other guys would spend it on girls, he spend on his little brother. And it was very sweet. A terribly sweet guy. Of course, he spent it on girls, too, you know, I suppose. [They laugh.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: He went into the Army when he was 18.

WOLF KAHN: No, he went in—He got drafted I think when he was 20 or 21. I think he got drafted in '41. Yes, because he lived in Brooklyn for a while and went to Pratt and learned to be a commercial artist and had this job in New York as commercial artist's assistant which I then inherited when he got drafted.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How old were you at this time?

WOLF KAHN: 14.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You were very young to be filling in on that kind of a job.

WOLF KAHN: Well, it was the wartime. They couldn't get any manpower. And then the stupid boss there wrote Peter a letter when he was in the middle of the Battle of the Bulge or someplace like that saying that I was bidding fair to be a much better artist than he'd ever been, things like that which must have delighted Peter.

So anyway then he came back. Then I got drafted in the Navy. Oh no. I enlisted into the Navy when I graduated from high school music and art.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, it's going to take awhile before you get to the Navy in this high school period which was a pretty important period, too, wasn't it?

WOLF KAHN: Not really. I don't think so. I think the important part of the high school period was the fact that I had a job and had more money than the other kids in the school. It made me have kind of a cavalier attitude towards security and money and things like that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you work after school at this job?

WOLF KAHN: Yes, and Saturdays. And I always had a lot of dough because I started making—I was making war bond posters and I began to think of myself as a commercial artist. Then I made a cartoon. I wanted to be a cartoonist I think. That's really what like David Loew or somebody like that. I wanted to be the new Loew. Hit a new Loew.

[They laugh.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: And this was the course that led you to be friendly with Allan Kaprow and

how did you—

WOLF KAHN: That's right. Allan was in my class in high school and he was always drawing horses. He'd been in Arizona being treated for asthma.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

WOLF KAHN: And he got all involved in being a cowboy. And in all the classes, in all the art classes, he used to draw horses. And the teachers would encourage him to draw something else. And he would stubbornly resist.

I used to tell Allan, gee, you're wasting too much time fighting the establishment. I didn't say quite in those kinds of words. [They laugh.] But I said, "Why don't you play it their way? It's so easy. You're always getting in trouble with the teachers." I was sort of the teacher's pet really.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Why were you the teacher's pet? Because of your—

WOLF KAHN: I was very good. I was a hard-working kid. And then I got a cartoon published in PM which was a big feather in my hat. I got called down to the principal. And then I was the graphic arts editor of the school newspaper. And I was like a—Especially by the time I was a senior I was sort of a character known around the school. Also I had the best looking girl in the school as my girlfriend.

And Allan, we were very close and still I didn't understand his life. I didn't understand his style. And I don't think I ever will. I mean it started then.

But I never worried about it. I never thought about it. I just thought he's making a mistake.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But he did stop drawing horses I suppose at some point and do something else then, didn't he? Or he—

WOLF KAHN: Well, the next thing I know of Allan is when I got out of the Navy and we were going to Hofmann's. And there was Alan. I think I probably encouraged him to go to Hofmann's.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, I think you did.

WOLF KAHN: And then again when Hansa Gallery started. And in those days Allan was quite I must say influenced by my painting and my Jan Müller's painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: He thought he was influenced I believe even in high school by you.

WOLF KAHN: Well, I don't know.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And your advice.

WOLF KAHN: Yes, I don't know. And also maybe I had a lot more freedom certainly than he had because he's got this terribly thick-headed father.

I've got a very funny story about Allan's father. I met him on the subway. And Allan's father used to always—he was insisting that Allan should become a lawyer like he was. He was a self-made man. He became rich being this Jewish lawyer. And I always despised him because I could see that every time I went over to his house he was at Allan and saying "Why don't you do this? Why don't you do that? Why don't you be like Wolf who does this and who does that?"

And I could see he had no feeling for his son really. I used to encourage Allan to rebel against his father. And I mean Allan would sit there at the table eating this greasy Jewish food and Allan would be like with his head down on his plate refusing to eat his dried out meat. And his father and his mother were complaining about him to me. And I used to try and say something positive during these terrible embarrassing times.

So I always thought that Allan's father was one of his worst enemies. And finally like Allan developed such an ulcer that he got peritonitis and he practically had to die. And the doctor said to Mr. Kaprow "Leave the boy alone. Let him do what he wants. Otherwise he's going to die." So finally then Allan could be an artist.

Anyway I met Mr. Kaprow a few years ago, maybe a couple of years ago, in the subway. And he says, "Well, what do you think of my boy? What do you think of my boy, Allan? He's really done something, hasn't he?"

So I said, "I don't really understand what Allan's doing these days. But he's certainly gotten famous."

[End Tape 1.]

Mr. Kaprow said, "What about Cézanne when he was working? Nobody understood him. Van Gogh, nobody understood him."

[They laugh.]

A lot of all great artists, they're not understood in their lifetime.

DOROTHY SECKLER: A beautiful irony, wasn't it?

WOLF KAHN: What a terrible man. That's a good indication for the future when you think that there can be such a change from one generation to another. And yet Allan is going to begin to portray an arrogance and a stiff neckedness about what he is, that obviously the sins of the father's get transferred to the children. Is that how it says it in the Bible?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. The third or fourth generation or something like that.

WOLF KAHN: Yes, unto their children and unto their children's children.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. Quite a thought. Well, I had derailed you a bit when you were beginning to talk about your experience in the Navy. If you'd like to come back to that, I imagine that has some importance, too.

WOLF KAHN: Well, Navy, you know, not really. In the Navy, I went to radio school which was a mistake because I had very little feeling for mechanical things really. And I flunked out of school which was in a way a humiliating experience for me because I'd always been such a good student and so on.

But then when I flunked out, I got a job drawing portraits of officers which was nice. [They laugh.] But this was in the days when everything was in dissolution. It was after VJ Day and people were trying to just sort of wait until they got discharged.

The good thing about the Navy of course was the aftereffects, that I got the GI bill. That allowed me to think about the future without having to heed the practical consequences.

So I tried to go to Columbia for some reason. I thought I was still undecided about how you went about becoming whatever I wanted to be which was a mixture of artist and prophet and philosopher and God knows what. I mean, I didn't have it very clearly in my head exactly. But my brother at that time was already attending the League. But Peter by this time I felt I was more sophisticated than he was. And I looked at his work and I kept trying to give him criticisms which he of course didn't take kindly to. Here was his upstart little brother telling him how to paint and so on.

Peter was doing some kind of German expressionistic sort of thing where you make like a face into a triangle and put one eye big and one eye small. I mean, it seemed a very strange kind of work to me. So I sort of—I mean, I felt it was misunderstood modernism at the time.

And I was too late. I got discharged in the summer. So the only school I could go into then was the New School. I decided I'd study with Stuart Davis. I took a few academic course, too. And Davis, of course, was a total flop as a teacher.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

WOLF KAHN: A wonderful painter. But I mean he didn't take it seriously. He used to say "All right, children." At the end of the class, he would say "All right, children. It's 10:00 p.m. Let's close the magic portals. We've conjured up enough art atmosphere for the evening."

[They laugh.]

And then how did it happen? Did Peter go—Well, relations between Peter and me got to be sort of strained. But I think I went to the Hofmann School first and then he followed soon after. Anyway, we were both at Hofmann's for a period.

DOROTHY SECKLER: He was at NYU for a while.

WOLF KAHN: That was after the Hofmann School. Anyway, I was at the New School only from September until February. In February, I went in the Hofmann School. And that of course was a totally different environment, a whole other kettle of fish.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

WOLF KAHN: I mean all of a sudden I began to see that being an artist was a total kind of commitment. And there I was in the company of my peers and my betters really. Here were all these GIs, most of them about five years older than I was. I was at that time I think 18 or 19.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Who were some of the others in the class at that time?

WOLF KAHN: Oh, golly. John Grillo, Joan Mitchell, Jan Müller, Felix Pasilis.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Myron Stout.

WOLF KAHN: Who?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Myron Stout.

WOLF KAHN: Myron Stout, he was there, yes. Well, and then I went to Provincetown that summer. And there was Paul Georgis, Larry Rivers, Lee Rose, Leatrice Rose. Who were the others? Oh yes. Bob Goodenall. It was a bunch of people who you had to take seriously.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And you had the advantage of understanding German. [Laughs.]

WOLF KAHN: Yes, I used to be Hofmann's interpreter to the old ladies. I was the monitor in the school then and I practically lived at Hofmann's house and became quite close to him. I did a lot of his work for him, stretching his canvas, cleaning out his studio. And I ate lunch there with him and Ms. Hofmann.

It was a very exciting summer, that first summer there in Provincetown. I'd found out that I wasn't as big a shot as I thought I was because there were all these other guys who were terrific artists already, much more advanced than I was.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How did Hofmann's concepts of painting affect you?

WOLF KAHN: It affected me very strongly and still do. First of all, the most important thing that Hofmann I think transmitted to his students is this idea of art being something that fills your whole life. You know, the idea of art as a paraphrase of existence in general. Like the idea of the perfect painting, it's this great idea. We all felt it's possible to make a perfect painting. Nobody ever made it, but it was possible. Some people had gotten closer to it than others.

The perfect painting would be something which had intelligence ordering every part. Everything would be under the control of a formal intelligence. And that's what we were working toward. I think everyone.

And you brought to this whatever background you had. Some people came to it with surrealism like somebody like Jean Follett or Stankiewicz. They were studying there, too. So somebody else came with a Mondrian background, Grillo and other people with full ideas like Pasilis.

But the idea was that painting was an intelligent construct and that it wasn't just something that you did as a gesture or as an idea. But it was something in which your whole intuition is constantly at work.

DOROTHY SECKLER: His color it seemed to me was more aphobish [ph] in it was—He apparently had less respect for tonal color than he did for color that was pure.

WOLF KAHN: Chromatic color, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Chromatic color. And yet I don't see in your work that you followed that particular—

WOLF KAHN: Well, in the work that I did until about 1958 that I think I was working with Hofmann I did of certain chromatic intensity. Then other things happened. I don't know.

You change because after all you're your own man finally.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

WOLF KAHN: You're not—

DOROTHY SECKLER: I was just curious as to whether you had gone through this phase or not.

WOLF KAHN: These things happen. You don't plan them. In fact, I don't believe in planning anything in painting. I think you follow your brush and the more alert you are to the implications of

what your brush is telling you the better, the more interesting, your work finally gets.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Just as you had this phase of work with more pure chromatics, did you also have a phase of working with sort of cubist color with the push and pull and the feeling of space and so on?

WOLF KAHN: Yes, when I was at the school, I was influenced by Picasso and Bonnard. I didn't understand really what Bonnard was about. But I remember I painted a painting of a chair of straw in one of those very Baroque kinds of straw outdoor furniture.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Wicker.

WOLF KAHN: Wicker chairs, right. In which quite I think instinctively I used grays against very bright colors like Bonnard does.

DOROTHY SECKLER: This was something of your own rather than Hofmann's I imagine. I never heard Hofmann speak very much of Bonnard.

WOLF KAHN: Hofmann spoke about Bonnard.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did he?

WOLF KAHN: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I didn't know.

WOLF KAHN: He did. Bonnard wasn't a star in his firmament let's say the way Mondrian was. But I remember once bringing in one of those folders of Bonnard reproductions and looking through them with Hofmann. And Hofmann said, "You know when a man on the street looks at this painting he sees nothing but brush stroke."

[They laugh.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: You're a very good imitator of Hans Hofmann.

WOLF KAHN: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you manage to retain whole lectures in your mind?

WOLF KAHN: Oh, I have a whole nightclub act about Hofmann posing the model which is very indecent which every now and then I do.

[They laugh.]

I do when I have a willing victim at a drunken party. [They laugh.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Should we put it on separate tape?

WOLF KAHN: Like he says he has one thing. He says, "You move so much. I'll have to screw you on the floor." Things like that.

[They laugh.]

"And the space we have the legs this is so beautiful."

[They laugh.]

And this is all tied together with suitable moving the model.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Please let me record it sometime. [They laugh.]

WOLF KAHN: Well, it's not—I mean I really admired Hofmann. He was one of the few great men that I've met. I really admired him because I thought he was like the Bible in a way. He not only gave you directions, but he also gave you the opposite. So he always kept you kind of open enough like the Bible that says "To him who has to him shall be given." And then it says, "The poor man shall not go through the eye of needle and so forth."

DOROTHY SECKLER: The rich man.

WOLF KAHN: I mean the rich man. It's always contradictory statements. In other words, a statement to fit every occasion. And yet the general tenor of it is elevating.

And the same thing about Hofmann's teaching. You couldn't ever—I mean people who need that sort of reassurance and that sort of rigidity tried to make a system out of Hofmann's teaching. And yet somebody who didn't could find plenty of room within it.

I think that's really the big strength of him as a teacher. It's the reason that he was able to influence so many people to become themselves. He had this latitude and this confusion in his teaching which of course escaped most people.

But I was very conscious of it simply because I don't have that great need for systematic analysis that some people who went through the Hofmann school had. So I always looked for the other side of it and the fact one year expressionism was a dirty word and the following year expressionism was the highest praise. It just depended when you got to Hofmann whether one thing he said was true or something else.

But one thing he really believed in, which I also believe in and the little teaching that I do I think is still colored by this idea of Hofmann's, which is that there is such a thing as an objective language of forms that you can wish to see one thing. And yet forms will have an objective reality which in the final analysis means something definite no matter what your subjective desires are.

You might paint something one day and say that it moves in this direction and does that. And then you come back to it the next day. You constantly have that experience as an artist and see that it really doesn't do that.

I think Hofmann's teaching was in the direction of allowing you to read your forms correctly, to be able to read what you're doing correctly.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Do you feel that that was something that's a kind of absolute value or is it a value within the context of a fusion of cubist space with color, Matisse-like color? I mean if you go outside that concept would this still work?

WOLF KAHN: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It would?

WOLF KAHN: It works in Rubens. You know, I mean you can analyze the old masters from that point of view and see why they're great. And you can also see the lesser painters and see why they miss because they don't have this absolute control of their language. And I think Hofmann's importance as a teacher lay in trying to get the student to understand that no matter what you're doing there is a kind of reality, a basis in you might say an objective reality of the forms which gives them coherence no matter what kind of forms you use. And a lot of the painting today that you see sidesteps that issue completely.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Exactly. Sidesteps is precisely the word, isn't it?

WOLF KAHN: And it's an aspect of art that continues to interest me. It doesn't interest Andy Warhol. But I think the artist impoverishes the soul because of this idea that you're getting yourself in touch with a deeper reality with a kind of you might say an absolute in a way that underlies forms.

It's a beautiful idea, a kind of platonism of forms. But it's a very unfashionable idea right now.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

WOLF KAHN: But Hofmann was very much involved in that. And I don't say that that means that you have to paint any one way. But it certainly means that whatever way you paint it's important that you get your mode of painting to the point where these laws operate within your mode.

There are painters painting now who still have this. Even somebody let's say like Ellsworth Kelly who really has tried to strip his painting very bare. But finally he's still dealing with elements like that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: He's gone into sculpture and now into construction.

WOLF KAHN: Well, he's got to do that because his painting has become so intellectual. Finally there was nothing left to it except these bare bones. And it got very uninteresting. I'm glad he's doing something else.

And actually the less elements you work with the more certain these kind of relations become. That's I think one of the ideas underlying minimalist in general. It's a kind of absolute desire not to lose the sense that making work of art.

If you're making a painting with two relations in it, it's easier to think of it as a work of art than a painting with two million relations in it. The more relations you have the more difficult it is to control them.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Do you think these people are incapable of controlling them, the multiple relationship?

WOLF KAHN: I don't know. I think one of the things that happens there is that these people—This is one of the you might say bad implications of abstract art. You know you deal with these studio type relations. You're constantly in your studio.

You're not enriching your language with an exposure to natural realities and the terrible struggle of fitting non art matter into your art. Because like I say, you're painting a tree and you're having to do a tremendous job of reduction just to take those multiple forms and make them so they can be handled as art. But if you start out with a tremendously reduced scheme you can work within that universe of pre-reduced, pre-digested relations and never have to get more complicated. Except at a certain point you just throw the whole thing over and say I'm bored with it. Then you start making

constructions or going into film or going into dance or what.

I mean that's why I think minimal art is exciting for a moment. But the whole resistance, it's an art that has no internal resistance. The only resistance these artists have is the technical one of making like a perfect product or something.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Some go off and don't even make it.

WOLF KAHN: Then it immediately becomes very bad.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It's difficult to see how a generation of artists could be trained at this discipline in which there is no right.

WOLF KAHN: Do you mean the minimalist?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, if you assumed that there was a kind of minimal tradition.

WOLF KAHN: Well, I'll tell you.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How could an artist be trained in it because there isn't any conflict of forces to deal with.

WOLF KAHN: I think what happens there is the best people sense the contradictions within which they work and try to transmit that sense to their students, too, in the same way in which Hofmann, for example, used to tell us that the problem with modern art is it has no human content. I don't know how happy he would be with the human content that has since been allowed to enter into a universe of contemporary art as a pop culture and commercial art and so forth.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I once talked to him about it very briefly and he said, "Well, you know it's like Dada. It's sort of the salt and pepper of art." [They laugh.]

WOLF KAHN: Yes. Well, I think—

DOROTHY SECKLER: He wasn't too happy about it.

WOLF KAHN: Yes. He also said to me once. I was asking him what he thought of Rivers's show in which it wasn't really one of the really advanced ones. It was—Or maybe it must have been around 1958 or so that I talked with Hofmann about Rivers. '59 maybe. And he said, "You know how sometimes it always surprises me. As soon as an artist leaves my school, he goes in the wrong direction."

[They laugh.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: He also told me once though that the best artists were the ones who opposed him the most.

WOLF KAHN: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's again a Hofmann contradiction.

WOLF KAHN: Yes, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But I'm interested in your particular contradictions in any case.

WOLF KAHN: I'll tell you what happened to me at Hofmann's is I really swallowed the line hook, line and sinker when I was in the school.

[Audio break.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: You were saying that while you were at the Hofmann's school you swallowed the line hook, line and sinker.

WOLF KAHN: Yes. And then I became very—My work suffered as a result because I was much too intellectual about it all. And I got very neurotic you know. So I was desperate. I was desperately eager to get out of this. I was painting myself into a corner.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Could you describe one of the painting that you might have done when you were in an advanced class at Hofmann's, not when you just began?

WOLF KAHN: I was very influenced by Braque I made some still lives. I still have one still life that was very influenced by Braque, muted colors. It was actually quite a tonal painting, but Hofmann loved it.

And then I got influenced by Bonnard. And I got influenced by Kokoschka.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But you didn't work abstractly during this time.

WOLF KAHN: No. Maybe once or twice. But I never got any really good results in abstract. And the drawings at Hofmann School, practically all I'd do is draw.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You would draw from the mind.

WOLF KAHN: In my drawings I was cubist. I was analytical cubist and I did pretty well. I understood cubism very well.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But that you wouldn't recognize the figure more in your drawings than in most of the other students.

WOLF KAHN: Perhaps. No, not necessarily. When I think back on the drawings, there were planes. But I mean Hofmann, he was very delighted when he saw a student do cubist things because he felt that that was the most recent stylistic discipline that had been devised to deal with contemporary aesthetic ideas. I think he tried to direct students in that direction actually.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. I can't quite imagine anyone doing anything else.

WOLF KAHN: Oh no. There were people working—Well, I mean Mondrian. There's a good deal of late Mondrian kind of work being done.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

WOLF KAHN: And then the surrealism. Jan Müller for example was doing a cubist kind of surrealism at the time. And fauvism. There were all sorts of stuff going on. Jean Follett was doing fish eye figures. They were very strange, straight lines with a fish eye at some point.

Do you know her?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

WOLF KAHN: She's a very underrated artist.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I saw assemblage things of hers.

WOLF KAHN: Yes, that's right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I don't think I've seen drawings.

WOLF KAHN: Well, she had a big influence on a lot of people. For example, Stankiewicz is unthinkable without Jean Follett. And she never really got—

DOROTHY SECKLER: Where is she showing now?

WOLF KAHN: I don't know what happened to her. She had some operation on her eye. She was a very strange, sad girl, always wearing black velvet with white shirts and one spot of red, maybe a red ribbon or very bright red lipstick. She had like this uniform. Hofmann was very interested in her, too.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I never heard things.

WOLF KAHN: Hmm?

DOROTHY SECKLER: I never heard things at the Hansa.

WOLF KAHN: Yes, she was one of the original people in Hansa.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But she was showing very strange things with wires.

WOLF KAHN: Yes, that's right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And pieces of cotton on it.

WOLF KAHN: And they always had this psychological sort of feeling about them.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, very threatening in some ways.

WOLF KAHN: Yes. Well, she was doing that kind of work as a student but just in charcoal.

DOROTHY SECKLER: How did he criticize it? I see it was in charcoal.

WOLF KAHN: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: So could he criticize that in terms of plasticity?

WOLF KAHN: Yes, yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: He did.

WOLF KAHN: He used a lot of her work. And he would always be at pains to show the correspondence between the movement of the artist on charcoal and paper and what was happening outside, as he called it, the model in relation to the chair, to the wall, to the floor, to the ceiling and so on.

DOROTHY SECKLER: When Jean Follett would draw from the model, would it be a cubist drawing

or a fish eye?

WOLF KAHN: It was her own kind of thing. It had cubist elements, probably Max Ernest elements. But it was very much her own kind of thing. She was always original. I mean not like me who I suppose in the beginning had no character of my own. I was just more or less an intelligent student of a tradition of painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, after your Bonnard period, or that went on for some time I imagine.

WOLF KAHN: No. Then I'll tell you what happened. I finally got very neurotic. I started having suicidal feelings and kleptomanic things. I mean I didn't really like myself then. And it all had to do with the fact that I was all hung up on Hofmann's teaching. I said to him—Finally, I decided after a year and half that I'd better get the hell out of there. And I said, "Look, Mr. Hofmann. I'm going to leave the school. I only have one more year on the GI bill and maybe I'm going to paint on my own for a year. And maybe I'll go to university somewhere like that."

So Hofmann said, "Ah, this is very good. I think you have mental indigestion." And he was very true. That's exactly what I had.

So I worked for a year. That's when I—Oh, I should also say that all this time when I was studying at Hofmann and then later on I was living next to Lester Johnson. We were pretty good friends then. He was really my big influence at that time. He was ten years older than I. Very much more formed than I was. We stayed good friends through the years.

But I mean his influence didn't come out really in my work so much except maybe more lately because he was always a tonal painter, much more than a chromatic painter.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But Hofmann accepted your tonalism, did he? When you were working tonally, he didn't find it—

WOLF KAHN: Well, because I was always a tonal kind of painter who had his tone very much separated. He used them as colors the way Morandi does for example. I mean it's hard to call him a tonal painter if you think of, let's say, a tonal painter as being Magnasco how he uses chiaroscuro.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

WOLF KAHN: And his paintings were—

[End Tape 2.]

WOLF KAHN: So sharply.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I'd better identify this. This is a continuing tape with Wolf Kahn.

And Hofmann then recognized that tonality in your work was not tonal in the sense of the modeling and chiaroscuro in the traditional sense.

WOLF KAHN: That's right.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I can see you were still—

WOLF KAHN: I think there's such a thing as tonalism used in a modern way. After all, it's something you can't get away from.

DOROTHY SECKLER: No. Could you define it a little bit? I'm curious about this because I feel this myself. But I've never clarified it.

WOLF KAHN: I think what it is is where the tones are under sufficient control that each tone becomes also a color. That it just isn't a sliding through a tonal range, but a kind of a grading of your tonal range and a controlling of your tones toward the warm and the cold of each tone so that you can grade them against each other as colors.

Let's say in that pastel.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

WOLF KAHN: That's a tonal pastel and yet the dark isn't only a dark, but it's also a blue. Whereas another dark is a gray. Let's say a brownish-gray or another dark would be a green. But still the overall effect that is the strongest relation in the picture is one of dark and light, but not to the point where the color relations get lost.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I think that's very well put. Of course, you feel there's no systematic thing of moving it from darker tones to lighter tones on each object at all. Very often as in this case the object is almost flat. The form is flattened up considerably. Whereas here there is a—WOLF KAHN: I really haven't got any talent for systemization. So even though it may be there, I don't want to know about it.

[Seckler laughs.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's a nice way to put it. You see the total figuration when you look at a landscape. Certainly, that's very clear that your focus somehow is not on a specific tree and a specific hill, but the total kind of—

WOLF KAHN: I don't know. I think what I'm really basically interested in in landscape is position like where things are. That a tree is large which includes scale, which includes just spatial relations of one thing is here, something else is there and the relation that ensures because of those differences of positions.

That's one reason Giacometti interests me tremendously because he dramatizes the positioning of things. These apples are lying on that buffet in a certain way. They're right here. And he works like a dog to get them to sit right there in front of the buffet right here. Cézanne had that, too.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But you do it and Giacometti does it without planes. I mean of course there are planes, but I mean one doesn't see planes in that sense.

WOLF KAHN: I think I do it lately more through hazes, through density of hazes. I feel I do it through the density of the paint.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's very important, isn't it? Now would you say that relates to the Giacometti concept at all in drawings?

WOLF KAHN: Well, Giacometti, I tell you he does it. I mean it certainly looks different than mine. There's very little relation between my painting and Giacometti's.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Not obvious ones certainly.

WOLF KAHN: No, but the thing that we have in common probably would be an urgency about placing something in an exact spot and making the relation between the viewer or the artist and this object being in an absolute one to one relationship.

Then we really believe that when you put, let's say, a barn inside a canvas, that's where it is. It can't be anywhere else. It's got to be something that's very much there.

When Giacometti places a figure on a chair in a corner of his studio, it's like very much there. Morandi when he places a bottle, it's tremendously exactly there.

DOROTHY SECKLER: This is almost in a way in conflict with the Bonnard concept in which things are so open, moving out the sides of the painting. Isn't it a bit?

WOLF KAHN: Well, no. I don't think I—No, Bonnard is something else again. Bonnard, he's really a weaver. You know he makes a tapestry like they say.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

WOLF KAHN: But he's a great enough artist that within this tapestry things also have a very exact position. This contradiction between this tapestry and the positioning is really what interests me particularly in Bonnard.

But Bonnard doesn't interest me that much anymore. I went through a period where my work was very closely related to Bonnard, especially through the color I think.

But now I'm much more interested in somebody like Giacometti or Morandi or old masters. In fact, I'm not nearly as interested in other painters as I used to be. I'm much more interested in objects themselves and in nature.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Explain what you mean when you say in objects themselves.

WOLF KAHN: Lately I've been painting these barns and if you could see them.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Would you like to bring in some of the pastels? That way we could actually talk about those that you've been working on.

WOLF KAHN: Yes. Let me see.

[Audio break.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: We're now looking at two sketch books which have paintings or drawings in pastel in which barns occur. And the first one.

WOLF KAHN: Ah here. See. Here the barn just appears over the brow of the hill, you see.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

WOLF KAHN: Well, it's something I see every time I go down my driveway there in the country. And I just have a feeling about it that there's a perfect way to make that barn appear over the brow of the hill so that it really becomes an archetypal image in a way. I haven't done it in this drawing at all. That's the first one I did.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I think it might.

WOLF KAHN: But then I have paintings over in the studio in which I finally worked this out where the thing really begins to loom there in this much more exact way.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Now I think I know what you mean when you say image. But could you explain that a little bit for the tape?

WOLF KAHN: Well, I mean where you see—I think any image worthy of its name is an archetypal image. It's almost like archetypal is a redundancy because an image is something which is stripped of its accidentals. And when you see something stripped of its accidentals it seems like it's there for all time.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes, I think that explains it beautifully.

WOLF KAHN: And I think every object can be seen like that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Every object?

WOLF KAHN: Every object. Every scene, everything. Every person even. You know like Gertrude Stein of Picasso. She's got that quality that she's there for all time. It's not just a portrait, but it's something seen in its completeness.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Do some objects have it more than others?

WOLF KAHN: Well, for certain artists, sure enough. Not everybody can paint everything. For example, a Canaletto he painted Venice. For him, Venice was the storehouse for those kind of images.

And then he went to London and tried to paint London. And his paintings all of a sudden became very ordinary. I mean they just became ordinary 18th century landscapes with a good light because he knew what he was doing whenever he was painting. But they don't stay in your memory. They don't have that archetypal quality because he didn't understand the London landscape that well.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Do you include artificial machine made objects as well as natural objects in saying this?

WOLF KAHN: Yes. I think for example a painter I like a lot is Walter Murch who just died.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

WOLF KAHN: And he used to paint these little pieces of mechanical machinery and give them some of that quality. I think you could paint anything like that as long as you do with this kind of incisiveness which the occasion requires.

Edwin Dickinson does it when he paints Wellfleet.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

WOLF KAHN: He can't do it as nearly as well when he tries to paint let's say Greece. He's got that awful painting in the Metropolitan Museum of all those columns and so forth. It's really not a very interesting painting because it doesn't have that quality. It's a completely synthetic painting.

I think one of the things you get from this is this synthesis has to build up to a totality which explains more about the thing than the sum of its parts. Like my barn, if I painted it exactly with all

its shingles, I couldn't get it.

And if I painted it on the other hand as a silhouette in a fog I think I'd get it much more because then you get the shape and you get the largeness of it. That's the part that I feel is crucial on the barn, the size of it. It's much more a reality than let's say the farmhouse next to it.

I mean I'm sure you've had that experience traveling through the countryside and looking at the barns and almost ignoring the little white painted house that stands next to it because the barn is like such a terrific image. I mean it's a terrific object, it's not an image, because it's got like this landlocked whale quality you know of sort of a Moby Dick thing. It also encompasses a whole—It has a sociologic implication, poetic implications.

And in the American landscape it has as much to do with American life today as let's say the Roman ruins had to do with the life in the 17th century. It goes back to a Golden Age. And for us the Golden Age was like 19th century rural America or 18th century. You know the heroic age in America.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Of course, what happens to the artist when there are no more barns, when there are only forms that speak of today let's say? Presumably in the next decade rural life is going to all but disappear.

WOLF KAHN: Well, I think they'll hold on all the more tenaciously to those remnants of it that exist. It's a nostalgic thing and at the same time it's a nostalgia that is still tremendously operative and not nostalgia in a bad sense. For example, Andrew Wyeth, I consider an artist who deals in nostalgia in the bad sense, in the antique store kind of sense.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, wouldn't he be just let's say—Wouldn't his emotion about the barn—You feel that that would not be archetypal.

WOLF KAHN: No, it's not.

DOROTHY SECKLER: He's just seeing it as—

WOLF KAHN: He's seeing as—

DOROTHY SECKLER: —a patina and?

WOLF KAHN: Yes, it doesn't go.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And something sentimental.

WOLF KAHN: Yes, it doesn't go down to the core of it, to the core of it which embraces by universals. We can paint a barn the way Morandi painted a bottle.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, of course there were—

WOLF KAHN: Or even the way maybe let's say—what's his name—Edward Hopper, the way Hopper painted those Victorian houses. He had that quality, too, I think. He's a terrific artist of the American scene. I mean I think eventually Hopper's paintings will have—will be known apart from the American context because he gives a universal quality to those American houses. And he still keeps the local color very strongly aligned.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Do you know of any artist who has been able to, from your point of view, give that quality to elements in the industrial scene in a moving way?

WOLF KAHN: Yes, Antonioni.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, in film.

WOLF KAHN: Yes, in film. In painting, well, you know like maybe Spencer or Sheeler or somebody like that. But I don't really know. I don't really like their work. But I'm not really tremendously in sympathy with it because I don't like it.

Maybe I don't want anybody to do it because—

DOROTHY SECKLER: I was thinking of Demuth who made this painting a rather beautiful little cubist watercolor of grain elevators and called it *My Egypt*.

WOLF KAHN: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I mean there's this American impulse to say the industrial scene is really our Egypt and our eternity and so on. And yet very few have been able to make it stick.

WOLF KAHN: Yes. I don't think anybody's ever really painted the American landscape in such a really convincing way in which I would say Corot painted the French landscape or Morandi the landscape around Bologna so that you really feel that they captured the light. They captured the unique quality of that place.

When you look at Dickinson, you don't think—You think of America eventually, but first you think of the impressionists or Boudin or somebody like that.

I suppose when you look at my work I suppose one first thinks of European painters, too. I don't know.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And this doesn't bother you.

WOLF KAHN: Yes, yes. I would like to do something that's much more autonomous than what I've done hitherto.

DOROTHY SECKLER: When you go out into actual landscape, I've noticed that it's very difficult to find a place in which one doesn't see let's say telephone poles or wires, electrical, conveyor forms.

WOLF KAHN: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Highways, highway signs. In other words, in order to tell the truth, you can't really see the landscape just as the French 19th century artists did because it doesn't look that way. I mean it's full of other things that creep in. In other words, if you find that one little quarter of a mile that doesn't have any of those things in it, it's such an exception that you feel if you're escaping. You're running away from what really is the landscape we experience.

WOLF KAHN: I don't know. I don't think Poussin experienced the classical landscape that he was constantly painting either. I mean after all landscape painting is sort of a—

DOROTHY SECKLER: You mean it's an ideal and not a reality.

WOLF KAHN: Yes, it's an ideal. You're dealing with something reduced to where it corresponds to the needs of your mentality. It's your dreams and so forth. I mean the fact that there's telephone poles there doesn't mean you can't leave them out.

I'm totally against the idea that art has to be a witness. You know it's got to be a deal with the times and so forth. It's going to deal with the times anyway whether you want it to or not.

I mean what art first of all has to do it's got to deal with the needs of the spirit and those are always somehow out of touch with the times. I mean it's lovely if they can also be—if through your art you can also point out some tremendous beauty that's readily accessible to everyone, let's say, like telephone poles.

In fact, this spring I got very much into a frame of mind like that. I took a group of students from Cooper Union to Green Camp which is in New Jersey. And it used to be Peter Cooper's farm. And around there, there's all sorts of suburban developments springing out in this sort of new growth forest that you have in New Jersey. It's just very thin, kind spindly, trees about 20 feet high. And then the bulldozers go in there and start putting up these white, two story low structures. And actually in a certain kind of light, it's very beautiful especially if you know the sociological implications. And I decided what I really would like to do is to glorify the suburbs. This is the new pioneering spirit in America.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

WOLF KAHN: And I painted a couple paintings like that. And I painted another painting which I—I wish I had it here to show you. But it turned out to be a good painting of a fire path going up a hillside between two—You know how they cut down like a swath through the forest.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

WOLF KAHN: It's almost like they went up there with a giant lawnmower. Or sometimes they do this, they cut this into the nature and then put telephone poles up through the woods. And all these things are tremendously exciting and they have this quality.

I mean it's like a romance of the moment. And I love to paint that. I just haven't found the perfect way of doing it yet.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Do you think that you could find it—It's possible to find in the suburbs a way of creating an image that would have this archetypal feeling?

WOLF KAHN: Oh yeah. Definitely. It would be terrific to do. And I won't be the one to do it.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, I'm sure you'll beat me. I've been trying for years.

WOLF KAHN: Oh yeah. You live there. That's the problem.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

WOLF KAHN: You see what you have to do. What you have to do is—I found out one thing. When you live in the country, you paint your worst paintings about the country. It's when you get back to Broadway and you have the roar of the traffic going on and all the Puerto Rican girls rushing back and forth from their sweat shops.

[Seckler laughs.]

Then I started painting my barns and all these things because they're seen through the haze of memory. And this thing—what is it—that Ruskin said that the artist's emotion captured in tranquility or something.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. Recurring.

WOLF KAHN: Yes. I mean it's really very true. Of course, nowadays we think of artists being Andy Warhol and so forth. And all these old ideas go by the board, but they're really very true. If you get yourself—

I was talking with Lester Johnson whom I visited last Sunday and he's very refreshing because he's got this tremendous aggressive conservatism. He's very involved in keeping the ideas that he grew up with viable. And he puts on blinders. He doesn't mind doing it.

And he just spits at all these people who set up conflicting ideas of art with the thing that he says. He says, look, if you start with the idea that art should be spiritually elevating, if that's your definition of art that you make that's spiritually elevating, then all these guys become nothing. Who can think of Andy Warhol in that kind of context?

On the other hand, all the things that you love really have this, Vermeer, Rubens, Picasso, Matisse. Maybe there's something to that to have that kind of a certitude about where you're at and to be intolerant about everything that comes along and challenges those ideas.

I'm not able to be that aggressively intolerant as Lester is because I'm much more of a doubting Thomas anyway.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Would there be a—I'm of course conflicted in my own feeling.

WOLF KAHN: Well, we all are.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Would there be a possibility that if you excluded dealing with the actualities of our environment which is so hectic and so mechanized and computerized.

WOLF KAHN: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That you are excluding also the possibility of humanizing it through bringing into feeling is the thing I battle with in myself.

WOLF KAHN: I don't think anybody is really able to do that anyway. It's a strawman that you're setting up. I mean for example even somebody who is painting outright nostalgia. Let's somebody like Seymour Remenick in Philadelphia. Do you know his work?

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

WOLF KAHN: You know it's outright nostalgia. It's got nothing to do with—He paints Philadelphia seen through the evening haze and it sort of looks like Rotterdam painted by Jacob van Ruisdael or something like that. And still you see that pathos in those paintings is the impossibility of doing that.

And it's painted right into the painting so that you see the painting and at the same time you see

the impossibility of keeping those feelings alive. And it's that tension that is painted right into the painting. They are paintings that are at odds with the environment, that are at odds with the mainstream of contemporary life that gives them their beauty.

It's almost like seeing, let's say, an old family retainer. At the same time, you know that he's somebody that's going by the board as a viable way of life. You're still touched by these feelings. They've got a beauty in their own right. You know somebody who gives his allegiance to another family or something, to his rich master or something.

So I mean whatever you do it's got a validity as long as it's done with conviction.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Someone like Stuart Davis who was so bad as a teacher as you point out was still a pretty vital painter. And he had tackled this thing of bringing into formal language the idea of American life with its vulgarity.

WOLF KAHN: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But that tradition has not—I mean unless you consider pop art a continuation of it maybe in some way.

WOLF KAHN: Yes, that's all it is. I think that's the least interesting part of Davis's painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You do.

WOLF KAHN: That's what I would call the sociological implications of Davis's painting. What's really interesting about Davis's painting is like the stop and start of the line and the jaggedness of it.

I personally don't think his painting has anything to do with jazz at all even though he's always chattering about how it has to do with jazz. He wrote jazz in the painting and all. But I think that's the least important part of the painting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: The idea of vibrancy and things constantly changing apparently has something to do with it.

WOLF KAHN: But you look at Davis's paintings now and they look very static. That's the funny thing about it. Like they look very static compared to Rauschenberg in which in Rauschenberg they are much more jarring contra-positions. Let's say brush stroke against a missile.

That's much more jarring than let's say a blue area against a red area. I know we've gotten so used to that. Maybe it was never jarring to begin with. But I don't think Davis is a jarring painter at all. He's become a very calm painter.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I once visited him in his studio and he had the television going right beside his easel all the time. And he didn't care what it was, although he liked the ball games best. But the fact that it was a constantly changing image appealed to him.

WOLF KAHN: Yes. Well, he tried to do that and you see it. For example, he tries to make harsh cuts in his painting. But they turn out in retrospect not to be harsh.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, it wasn't quite a—

WOLF KAHN: I mean I think actually things that you try to do in your painting are always the things

that don't come off.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That could be.

WOLF KAHN: It's the things that happen that you're not aware of that are always much more interesting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's very true.

WOLF KAHN: It's like exactly as—What's that English writer's name? What's the name of that book? Studies in Classical American Literature.

DOROTHY SECKLER: English?

WOLF KAHN: Yes, he's an English writer, a very good one. He wrote *Sons and Lovers.*

DOROTHY SECKLER: Oh, D.H. Lawrence.

WOLF KAHN: D.H. Lawrence, right. He said one beautiful thing about Melville. He said, "The beauty of *Moby Dick* is that Melville didn't know what the symbol meant." So I feel that way about art.

People are too interested in knowing what it all means. And really the beauty of it is when you don't know what it means, when it carries a charge that's much greater than you are, than your conscious mind is. And that's where art begins. That's why I think a lot of the stuff that's being taken so seriously now really isn't all that profound because it doesn't carry that charge.

DOROTHY SECKLER: It excludes an intuitive level.

WOLF KAHN: Yes, it's too understandable. For example, another painter who interests me is Josef Albers simply because he thinks he's doing color exercises. But really what he's involved in is like good old German metaphysics because his colors never—he doesn't stop until his colors get to have some kind of a strange glow, an unearthly kind of a glow. That's when his paintings really get good.

And he's not happy until that happens. Although he says that at that point he's successfully completed his color exercise. Or like Seurat he's another wonderful example. His people talk about my poetry and my work. He says all I do is I just fulfill my system.

I mean artists have always been very stiff-necked that way.

[End Tape 3.]

And of course that's a wonderful example. Henri Rousseau is another one. His ideas about what he was painting. And what he was really painting completely at variance.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

WOLF KAHN: On the other hand, there's somebody who was really smart like Picasso. He says crazy things like when I'm painting—What did he say? He says when I'm painting a well I think that there's a third person painting with me or something.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

WOLF KAHN: It's just like when I'm painting badly it's just my eyes and my hands. And when I'm painting well, there's a third agency there. I don't know exactly how he said it. But there's always somehow the idea that there's something bigger than yourself that's involved. That's why I can't get terribly excited about all the work or much of the work that exercises our best critical minds right now because I miss that dimension in it.

On the other hand, among the younger people like somebody like Kelly. Agnes Martin I like a lot. Do you know her work?

DOROTHY SECKLER: I know Agnes. I haven't seen what she's been doing lately. We were at [inaudible] together.

WOLF KAHN: And let's see who else. I like a lot of some of the geometric stuff. But most of it I think is exactly—

DOROTHY SECKLER: What about color field painting? How does that—

WOLF KAHN: I haven't really been able to get terribly interested in that. I mean it seems to me involved in a game with a very narrow range of ideas. And it fulfills those ideas like too fully. There's not enough of an overlap into things that aren't explorable and aren't explainable.

And then the best guys in it seem to me to have to make these funny kind of flip flops like let's say Noland, like the stripe paintings of Noland. I mean they're ridiculous even though his early things—I think at a certain point he was going towards something very—more in the direction of Albers like I was saying where he was looking for something that was very sharp and very pointed.

But then all of a sudden he flips around and starts doing those stripes. And it's really pure hedonism without any ideas in it. Although I mean idea in a good sense. Idea in the bad sense I think we've got too many of. I mean there are so many ideas.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes. The direction represented by Stella would seem to you I suppose the same.

WOLF KAHN: Stella is another guy who I think his early work is much more interesting than what he's doing now. I like those black and white striped things. Again, they're very narrow as an idea. And I suppose he had to at some point just throw the whole thing over in order to escape out of the narrowness of that idea.

What he's doing now I think is a funny way nostalgic painting, too. It goes back to like the style. It's really camp in a way. I mean it's the idea of good design of Rockefeller Center and the top of the Empire State Building.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

WOLF KAHN: The Chrysler Building. And as such at least it has the validity of having to do with his youth. That's the climate he probably grew up in.

Now I went out to Lester Johnson's as I said and I saw that he's doing something very much like it now. He's painting paintings that look like futurism and World War I art. It's kind of funny in which he's got a whole bunch of figures going in one direction with legs going. But I mean he's such a good painter finally. What comes through is delight in the handling, the manual aspect.

That's something I always somehow or other demand when I look at art. It's the delight in the manual aspect. I mean that's why for example the art that's made by machine and the multiples and all that business doesn't interest me at all. I mean I get nothing from that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But the delight in the manual aspect of course had this implication, this extreme implication, of the promising of the act and the gesture and the artist's own action over the object that was being created. At least, that is what can be taken from it.

WOLF KAHN: I think that's a false issue because you take kids. Like you take any child, the first thing they do is they make drawings. It's such a natural thing and they use color. And it's like a very natural, human activity. And these people who come along and try and take that away from art, that aspect, like electronic musicians saying because we have these tools we make electronic music. Therefore you can't sing.

I mean these ideas of course have a validity. But their validity stops when they try to prohibit parallel traditional concerns. And a lot of these people like Allan, for example, Kaprow, they become very—or my friend, Stan VanDerBeek, a film maker.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

WOLF KAHN: He keeps saying painting is dead. So for him it was never alive. It was very easy for him to say that.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Was he a painter?

WOLF KAHN: Yes, he started out as a painter. He studied at Cooper Union. I've seen a few of his paintings and they were good.

And he found his field of action in film. But I mean it doesn't cost him anything to say that painting is dead. Therefore, I forbid him to say it.

If somebody has gone through an experience—Let's say maybe if Duchamp would say that painting is dead it would have to be taken a little more seriously because at least at one point he made paintings of a certain import.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Of course by his life he has said that.

WOLF KAHN: I think if you—I don't know if you've ever taped him.

DOROTHY SECKLER: No, I haven't.

WOLF KAHN: You should. You should ask him if he thinks that painting is no longer allowable.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I think he's practically said that, but I'll have to—I don't want to go on tape, on record.

WOLF KAHN: No, because he's really not. I've seen work that he likes like a guy named Barlocello, [ph] an Italian painter, that came highly recommended from Duchamp. Well, he's a painter. He's given form. He draws. He paints.

DOROTHY SECKLER: He was certainly more of an intellect than a painter even when he was painting. Although he was a capable painter.

WOLF KAHN: Even when he was painting, right. He's an idea man.

DOROTHY SECKLER: But he is an idea man.

WOLF KAHN: And in that sense he's the paradigm of what's commanding the scene now. The all idea man.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

WOLF KAHN: But I think their validity, they become my enemies at the point when they try to prohibit the game that I play. I'm perfectly willing to let them play theirs. I'm amused by it and I enjoy it.

For example, Andy Warhol I heard he was making a film. And he had a bunch of actors playing to a camera. In the meantime, he had another camera like on the side hidden somewhere that was shooting these actors playing to the camera that was supposed to be filming them. And that's a beautiful idea. I mean he's obviously a guy with a very wild imagination.

But people with that kind of a sense of the mental possibilities, these idea men, they very easily degenerate into people who have contempt for the manual aspect as I say because they're making it through their minds. And yet I think most really great painters make it with their hands.

[Telephone rings.]

[Side conversation.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, just by way of completing the record, I'd like to have you fill in on where your paintings have been exhibited over the years since you started showing.

WOLF KAHN: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Main galleries.

WOLF KAHN: Well, I was one of the opening founders of the Hansa Gallery. And I had three shows there. After then I went with Grace Borgenicht and I'm still with her.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What year was that? Do you remember roughly?

WOLF KAHN: 1956. I think I had my first show at Borgenicht. And my paintings are—I think the majority of them are in museums, not always the most recent ones unfortunately.

I had a brief moment of real fame around 1957. I had a second show. My first show at Borgenicht was a complete—It was all sold out. And I got a lot of coverage. I got a color reproduction in *Time* magazine.

But I think I got nervous about it and I ran away and went to Italy. And my style changed completely there in those paintings that I was associated with.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You thought success was threatening you.

WOLF KAHN: I don't know what it was. I just wasn't ready for it or something.

DOROTHY SECKLER: You lived abroad for awhile I believe.

WOLF KAHN: Recently, for four and a half years out of the last ten.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Where were you? I remember Italy and Greece.

WOLF KAHN: Yes. No, I was mostly in Italy, almost always in Italy.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And where specifically?

WOLF KAHN: I had a Fulbright at one time. And my wife had a Fulbright one time. And we lived in Venice for two years and that's where my style changed I think mostly in response to the light of Venice really.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And how would you—Talking about the light, what affected it on your paintings specifically?

WOLF KAHN: Well, I became much more interested in nuance and in grays and silvery sort of Mother of Pearl colors.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

WOLF KAHN: And that was right outside the window because they have this milky light in Venice. And I just got tremendously enthralled by that. My paintings started turning grayer.

DOROTHY SECKLER: That's interesting.

WOLF KAHN: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And then when you went to Greece.

WOLF KAHN: Well, in Greece I didn't paint really. I just traveled. Traveled in Greece and Spain a little bit. But then after that I went to San Francisco and San Francisco where they had these huge fog banks come creeping in, and they interested me.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Were you teaching out there?

WOLF KAHN: I was visiting professor at Cat [ph] in Berkeley.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Did you like it?

WOLF KAHN: Well, it made me nervous because it was my first teaching assignment.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Yes.

WOLF KAHN: And the students there were mostly older than I was or many of them were. But it was exciting.

DOROTHY SECKLER: What years?

WOLF KAHN: That was 1960. And then more recently I've been teaching Cooper Union in night school because I don't like to teach in the daytime.

I have a feeling that that's the kind of thing you do when you need money and I haven't needed money. I've been very fortunate. I've made my living from my work because people like my paintings.

I have a lot of collectors who come back regularly.

I have galleries all over the country now. I have a gallery in Boston, one in Detroit and one in Philadelphia and a couple smaller ones elsewhere in addition to Grace here in New York. So I've been able to keep my head above water with a family and so forth.

DOROTHY SECKLER: We should at least put your personal life on the record to the extent that you're married.

WOLF KAHN: I'm married to Emily Mason who is an abstract painter and very good. Her mother was a painter or is a painter, Alice Trumble Mason. And I have two children both of whom are painters of course. [They laugh.] One of them is nine and the other one is four and a half.

Well, I mean I survive with my work. Every now and then I get a grant. I've had a Guggenheim.

DOROTHY SECKLER: And you just bought a house in Vermont.

WOLF KAHN: Yes, which I haven't paid for.

[They laugh.]

DOROTHY SECKLER: And your studio is here as well as your—

WOLF KAHN: I have a studio which I share with my wife. We have it divided down the middle with two open doors. We listen to the same radio program while we paint and it's on Broadway. I used to share a studio with—the same studio I've been in for 16 years with of course interruptions. In the beginning, I shared it with Felix Pasilis. And then I shared it briefly with Bob De Niro and then I had Gandy Brody in there. So it's a studio with a history.

DOROTHY SECKLER: I can imagine.

WOLF KAHN: Yes.

DOROTHY SECKLER: Well, I think that will complete our record for now, Wolf.

WOLF KAHN: Good.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]