



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with George McNeil,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with George McNeil on January 9, 1968-May 21, 1968. The interview took place at his home in New York, and was conducted by Irving Sandler for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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

Interview

IRVING SANDLER: This is a taped conversation between Irving Sandler and George McNeil on January 9, 1968 at George McNeil's home.

GEORGE MCNEIL: Do you have any kind of plan that you want to follow?

MR. SANDLER: Well, no, not really. I thought in the three sessions-because we haven't got the work-I would today talk about your general career and the scene. The next time if we can get to the studio I want to concentrate on the development of your own work and also maybe a little more about the development of American art. And then the third time I thought we might get into ideas.

MR. MCNEIL: All right.

MR. SANDLER: I've got a list of questions here but I thought I wouldn't direct it too much. I know you did an interview with-

MR. MCNEIL: [Dorothy] Seckler.

MR. SANDLER: And she went a good deal into your earlier career. I thought I would just maybe go over some of that. To begin with, for example, what made you interested in art?

MR. MCNEIL: Well, I started in high school. I had a very good chairman of the art department, a man named Green, I think it was Benjamin Green. We had a major art program. So that when I was about 16 or so I started in drawing and knew then that I was going to make it my career. It just happened that at this high school there were many, very, very gifted students. Then when I went to Saturday morning classes at the Brooklyn Museum [Brooklyn, New York], which was important because at that time the Brooklyn Museum housed the collection of the Société Anonyme.

MR. SANDLER: This would have been-when?-the late 20s?

MR. MCNEIL: No, this would have been 1922 perhaps-no, wait a minute-1925.

MR. SANDLER: So that means that very early you were interested in modern art?

MR. MCNEIL: That means that when I was about 16 years old I already knew about modern art. I remember I took an advanced French class and I gave a talk to the class on French art and I recall dealing with the Impressionists. What I did was after the Saturday morning class at the Brooklyn Museum I went around through the Museum and saw the collection and went in to the library and saw the magazines. So I knew about [Pablo] Picasso and all the others when I was 18 or so. Then I won a scholarship to Pratt Institute [Brooklyn, New York], which was a general art course. There they were very backward about modern art. I had a very sympathetic watercolor teacher-I can't remember her name now. But when she saw my things she spoke about them in a wistful way. It's interesting that when I first started in art school, that would have been in 1927, I was influenced very strongly by [James McNeill] Whistler. And then over that year I remember being influenced by [Paul] Cézanne.

MR. SANDLER: Which of the Whistlers-the Nocturnes?

MR. MCNEIL: Well, everything he did. And I know that I was very sophisticated at that time because I was once sketching in this period around 1927 and the idea came to my mind-I had read something about art for art's sake-and I remembered as I was drawing, I suddenly thought, "what other sake could it be for?" I was puzzled, you know, that anyone could do anything except for really artistic or, we would say now, self-expressive purposes. So I was pretty knowing in those years. But the real signal event which got me directly interested in modern art was the lectures that [Vaclav] Vytlacil gave at the Art Students League, which as I remember were

perhaps in the fall of 1928 and the spring of 1929. He talked about some of the more structural aspects of modern art and I remember for the first time I learned about the influence of Primitive Art in relation to modern art, say, Giotto. I already knew that Pratt would be unsatisfactory, couldn't give me anything like what I wanted, and so I decided to leave.

MR. SANDLER: Did Vytlačil talk about [Hans] Hofmann?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. At that point I knew I wanted to study with Hofmann and I made up my mind that I would.

MR. SANDLER: Even to go to Munich [Germany]?

MR. MCNEIL: Even to go to Munich. Two things come in here at the same time. The Depression started and I had miserable jobs during the period. But I worked during the worst years of the Depression, say, from 1930 until 1935, or late 1934, December, 1934. I had regular jobs but they were horrible like house painting and poster making and elevator operator, a whole series of awful jobs. But I did save my money with the intention of going to Munich. And I would have gone if Hofmann hadn't come here in 1932. So it was just a correspondence of things. But there was an interesting interlude here and that is that when I left Pratt in the fall of 1929-of course, there wasn't any place to study here, nothing at all. [Arshile] Gorky I think taught for a month at the Grand Central School of Art, some substitution or something like that. That could have been even later but Gorky is involved with what I'm going to say. Because I went to the Metropolitan Museum and I worked there in 1929 and the winter and spring of 1930. Gorky was up there working at the same time. We both worked in the rooms with the Greek casts, which have since been removed from the Museum. Now Gorky was only eight years older than I was. He was then only 28 or 29 years old. But he impressed as being a very much older man, and a very sure man. And a very dramatic figure. He dressed in a very long overcoat at that time. He had a very long overcoat at that time. He had a beard. A wild-looking man. Caused a furor in the Museum to a certain extent. We never got friendly but we used to talk to each other. We were both obviously interested in modern art. I remember I made an abstraction at that point of some of the Greek statues there in the collection. These were casts, of course. And he was doing the same thing.

MR. SANDLER: At that point he was interested in Picasso, [Georges] Braque, [Juan] Gris?

MR. MCNEIL: Oh, yes, he was very clearly Picassoesque in this period.

MR. SANDLER: And that would have been-when?-around 1929?

MR. MCNEIL: 1929 to 1930. December, 1929 - the winter and spring of 1930.

MR. SANDLER: Had he known [John] Graham?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. Now the next year something interesting happened, and that is that I studied with [Jan] Matulka the fall of 1930, as I remember it; I'm not quite sure of these dates but I think that's when it was. In the fall of 1930 I began to study with Matulka at the Art Students League. And [Fernand] Léger visited the country. Stuart Davis arranged an exhibition at the Art Students League, I think, of himself, Gorky, Graham, and Matulka. These were the leading figures at this time.

MR. SANDLER: That would have been-?

MR. MCNEIL: That would have been either the fall and winter of 1930 or 1931, I'm not sure.

MR. SANDLER: And he showed Gorky, Graham, Davis, and Matulka. And who organized that?

MR. MCNEIL: I think Davis organized it. By the way, another thing of human interest is that at some point, which leads me now to think that maybe it wasn't 1930, it might have been 1931-Davis was giving a class at the Art Students League and I was supposed to be his monitor. And I think either no students registered for the class or only one student registered. It was something catastrophic. And that shows how little interest there was in New York at that time as far as modern art was concerned. Now just as an aside, the Museum of Modern Art [New York, New York] opened up in the fall of 1929. That was a very important event.

MR. SANDLER: Yes. And to a large degree I'm sure much of the education of many of the artists-

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, yes. At some point in the late 1940s I suddenly realized that I hadn't read many books on modern artists, you know, like surrealism and so forth. I had never read a book from start to finish but I knew a great deal about it. It was all these exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art which really educated us; you know, like month by month they would have these exhibitions. I remember there was an exhibition of German Expressionistic art. That must have been in 1931 or 1932. And there was an exhibition of [Vincent] Van Gogh very early around 1930.

MR. SANDLER: Very early, yes. But there were other figures. When you say Gorky, Graham, Davis, Matulka, what about such figures as [John] Marin or [Arthur B.] Carles?

MR. MCNEIL: Couldn't be further away from the art scene. Carles I didn't know of at all until I met his daughter Mercedes. And Marin was already a kind of hierarchical figure, you know, a master. Well, there wasn't any art world at that period. That's the point. There wasn't any art world. There wasn't any café life. There wasn't any center to go to. There was really nothing as far as a focus of modern art activity was concerned.

MR. SANDLER: And [Burgoyne] Diller of course was-

MR. MCNEIL: Diller and I and David Smith and Edgar Levy and Leo Manso and Irene Rice Pereira were all in Matulka's class when he started it either in the fall of 1930 or the fall of 1931; that can be checked by the Art Students League.

MR. SANDLER: Oh, sure.

MR. MCNEIL: So now Diller was working in the bookstore there. He was quite a young man, maybe 22 or 23 at the time and sometimes he came to the class, but really had nothing to do with what might be called the week-by-week learning experience. The rest of us though, David Smith and Pereira, we worked in the class and knew about Diller. As far as I know even at that time, 1930 or 1931, he was doing this what we now call-what?-Neo-pointillism?

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: Or Neo-impressionism-no-Neo-something-or-other. I don't know. Anyway, he was doing hard-edge painting. He was doing Mondrian-like paintings at this very early date, extremely early date. Because he had an exhibition in some jeweler's I think in the McGraw-Hill building. Very early, like 1931 or so.

MR. SANDLER: George, because Matulka has been a fairly-or this period and his role in it has been fairly forgotten, I want to go into him a little with you. But before I do, what was the atmosphere in your home?

MR. MCNEIL: No art at all. This is one of the magical things about New York City. The fact that I was able to go to this high school where this man Green was interested in art; he was a conventional painter but nevertheless, he was interested in it. Do you know Manfred Schwartz?

MR. SANDLER: I know of him.

MR. MCNEIL: Well, he was in my class. He was a very leading figure. He was clearly the most impressive of the art students in this high school, Thomas Jefferson High School [Brooklyn, New York]. So there was a great interest. And then I went to the Brooklyn Museum on Saturday mornings and one thing led to another. So by the time I was 18 or 19 I knew a great deal. But nothing from my home. No cultural background. My older sister helped me. In other words, I learned about books and things like that from her. She took me to concerts and plays and things like that when I was a child, or at least younger than she was. But everything I got I got because there was something called education. I went to a high school, which my brothers were not able to do, and learned about these values. Music and literature and all that sort of thing. So I am deeply grateful to it. And I always look at the whole process of education as being very exciting, illuminating; I'm a little bit of a nut about this.

MR. SANDLER: Before we go on to Matulka, one more thing-a little more about your attitude to Cézanne, because you mentioned that you were interested in both Whistler and Cézanne.

MR. MCNEIL: Now my interest in Cézanne may have come from those lectures of Vytlačil, or it might have been early, I'm not quite sure of that. But in any case, books like those of Roger Fry's, I think it's called *Vision and Design*. Anyway, I knew Roger Fry I'm sure by that time. I knew Clive Bell. I just got the clue that if you wanted to understand modern art you'd have to study Cézanne. So I looked at Cézanne as a structural artist. I still have some things that I made at that time, watercolors especially, which show very simple working in planes. I have a little head of a cast which clearly shows a Cézannesque influence. It's a little bit strange that when I was only about nineteen he was a great god to me; and he still is, he's still the most interesting of any artist that has ever lived, he's still the most important as far as I'm concerned.

MR. SANDLER: How did Matulka teach, or what did he teach?

MR. MCNEIL: Well now, you see, this is something that no one can understand today because the students who come to me at the age of about 21 to 23 are highly sophisticated and many of them have never had any realistic training at all and consequently they don't have any what you might call mis-education or mis-learning to contend with. Now I don't mean that working realistically, say, from the figure, is harmful. I don't mean that at

all. But I mean that someone like Matulka almost surely studied at the National Academy, and he almost surely was trained in academic modes of painting. In other words, he always thought in terms of three-dimensional illusionism. So what he did then was sort of a take-off from a certain style of Picasso like the still-lives of the 1920s, the objects where Picasso derived a semi-abstract, you might say, from recognizable object. You know, that still-life with the cast or the statue, the bust. That sort of thing. So that when Matulka taught he was teaching formally. He taught figure drawing, a kind of Picassoesque-that sculptural period of figure drawing. The funny thing is that he led me further and further away from modern art. I studied for one year with Matulka at the League and then one year in a private school. This was all in the evening, so it must have been 1930-1931 and 1931-1932 because I know that Hofmann was here in the fall of 1932. Now I'm sure of those dates; it was 1930-31 and 1931-32. And in 1931-32 I studied with Matulka, as I say, in a private class that he had. And I moved away from abstraction. I was doing more abstract work in, say, the fall of 1930 after having worked alone at the Metropolitan Museum. I went there every day. Then I used to go to the 42nd Street Library after I had finished working at the Museum and I would study books, draw from books. I remember Giotto. A great deal of study of Giotto at that time. And then I studied Picasso and Braque and all these others, and Cézanne, trying to understand what they had done. So I have sort of semi-abstractions made in 1929-1930.

MR. SANDLER: But Matulka would have been one of the very few who was at all oriented to modern art?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes.

MR. SANDLER: I guess Vytlačil would have been pretty much the only other one.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. Now Vytlačil wasn't here. Vytlačil went back to Europe after he gave these lectures. So he wasn't around. He came back in 1933. But, of course, by that time I was with Hofmann. But Vytlačil had more of a structural understanding of modern art and particularly of abstract. I think Matulka had more of an appreciation. But really I made quite realistic drawings when I was working with Matulka, these strong statuesque types of drawings.

MR. SANDLER: David Smith told me once that Matulka probably turned him on to modern art.

MR. MCNEIL: Well, he would have had to choose Matulka. He must have been interested before or he wouldn't have chosen Matulka. So Pereira and Smith and Diller and these other people, Levy and Lances, they all were there because they were vitally interested in modern art. At some point around-oh, no, that was later, that was in 1932-they had a big Picasso show up in Hartford and I remember we all went up there at that time.

MR. SANDLER: If Gorky, Graham, Davis, and Matulka were in 1931 the leading modernists on the scene than the whole orientation would have been very strongly to Picasso?

MR. MCNEIL: Definitely so. Definitely so. Overwhelmingly so. And the strange thing is that now in retrospect Picasso was only about 50 years old at that time. In other words, these men had been influenced by Picasso maybe when Picasso was only 35 or 40 years old. So it's completely fantastical how he just dominated the whole modern art scene throughout all these years. And I think the point to make with all of these men like Davis or Graham, Matulka and Gorky, is that they all were semi-abstract. In other words, they all worked from nature and then abstracted from nature. All of them had recognizable elements in their work. Davis less, of course. But nevertheless they all sort of worked from subject matter. That's the key to it. When you come to the 1930s you come to a whole group of artists who didn't work from nature at all, people like Green, for example.

MR. SANDLER: Yes. And the members of the A.A.A. [The American Abstract Artists]

MR. MCNEIL: Right.

MR. SANDLER: Before we get to those, in 1932 you became a student of Hofmann's. What was his teaching then?

MR. MCNEIL: Well, now there again the interest in Cézanne must have been reinforced by Hofmann. It's a very, very strange thing. Hofmann was very Cubistic, like a Cézanne Cubistic approach to teaching. And there again it was abstracting from nature, working from the figure and from still-lives. In those years it was very, very close-that is, 1932 or so-it was very, very close to analytic Cubism, say of 1910 to 1912-not synthetic Cubism, very many planes. Hofmann took the figure and broke it down into its main planes. So I remember that some students at the League were able to say, "There's nothing new about this. There's nothing modern about this. It's just like traditional drawing where he has sort of structuralized or structured the figure into basic planes." And there is some truth to this. Now I have an idea about Hofmann which I have never read anywhere, and I think it's an important idea. That is, I think Hofmann moved into the type of abstraction that he began to make later by learning from his students as much as his students learned from him, because people like [Giorgio] Cavallon, for example, were working relatively simply when they were working with Hofmann, say, in 1935. And Hofmann then, I think, in these years began to work away from a preoccupation with a kind of breakdown of subject

matter. You know, where you actually sort of there's no such word-but you sort of "cubicize" the figure, and if there's a change in the back of the figure, you "cubicize" that. Everything is broken down into planes. In the years after 1935 his work got simpler.

MR. SANDLER: Well, when does Hofmann resume painting?

MR. MCNEIL: Hofmann resumed painting about 1934.

MR. SANDLER: Because there's some question about that.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. I would say in 1934. Now he taught at the League in the fall of 1932 and the spring of 1933. Then in 1933-34 he had a private class in a school on Madison Avenue; I think it was 440 Madison. I know definitely he was painting at some point between 1933 and 1934 because he used to go to this office in this building on Madison Avenue and make little cardboard tempera paintings in the morning. Like he'd get there at 6:30 or 7 o'clock in the morning and work for three or four hours before the students came in to work. At that time I lived in a small hotel room in the Hotel Winslow nearby. So he couldn't have had any facilities to work there. He was drawing all the time, of course. Always he drew. But I know he was painting little tempera paintings, you know, like 11 by 14 or 12 by 15 paintings. About this time he got a studio on top of some downtown building in the garment district. Then he started really to work. So that by the beginning of 1935 he was clearly working.

MR. SANDLER: But it would have been in the Cubist vein?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes.

MR. SANDLER: What about [Henri] Matisse?

MR. MCNEIL: There was no influence of Matisse in the early days but if you turn this off I'll show you something interesting. [Machine turned off briefly.]

MR. SANDLER: What you're saying is that although he didn't particularly teach Matisse's ideas in the school, in his own paintings as he painted he veered toward Matisse?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. I think sometime around 1937, 1938, 1939 he was interested in a simpler kind of painting but he didn't really ever lose I think a graphic approach to painting.

MR. SANDLER: Did he ever have anything to say about such figures as Kandinsky?

MR. MCNEIL: Not really, I don't think.

MR. SANDLER: And [Piet] Mondrian?

MR. MCNEIL: No.

MR. SANDLER: [Joan] Miró?

MR. MCNEIL: No. I mean he appreciated them. They were all part of the scene. And he talked about them. But I think they were all alien to his basic concepts. I don't think he used them as examples as far as I remember.

MR. SANDLER: Well, I know the attempt to get three-dimensional objects in space working on two-dimensional surface was always important to him. But he wasn't using such ideas as push-pull?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, he was. Very strongly.

MR. SANDLER: In the 30s?

MR. MCNEIL: I'm quite sure he was, yes. Tensions, yes. I think so.

MR. SANDLER: Did you notice any change in his teaching?

MR. MCNEIL: No, I didn't notice any change in his teaching in the years that I was with him. By the way, you might say when I started to work with him in 1932, I was then 24 years old and I had a background in modern art behind me. I would say that he influenced me very much in that year at the Art Students League, but after that I worked more or less on my own. I mean I was connected with the school at least until 1937 but always I was working on my own and I was clearly, clearly influenced by him and learning enormously from him. But I don't seem to remember this kind of pedantic teaching which now in a strange way I get from my students. My students quote Hofmann and so forth but I don't seem to remember that to such a great extent.

MR. SANDLER: It was very open.

MR. MCNEIL: Extremely, extremely open. And this is one of the strange things, you see, about his students that, you know, someone like Mercedes Carles Matter did one kind of work. There was a man named [Albert] Swinden did quite a different type of work. Swinden, by the way, could have influenced Hofmann also. He was working with very, very simple planes, not in this sort of Cubistic manner. Swinden was working synthetically at this time. So I don't remember Hofmann as a pedantic teacher. This seems to come out much more in his writings than in his teachings.

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: For example, someone like Lee Krasner-her work was different, in a sense. So Hofmann had a number of people at that time who were working in different directions. And he was not a heavy teacher as far as I remember.

MR. SANDLER: Did he take any position to abstract art?

MR. MCNEIL: I think he hated decorative art. This is a point which I think is a little bit important for history, and that is, that when he had his exhibition last year there were comments about this relationship to hard-edge painting. And I remember distinctly that I took a small group from the class at some point around 1939 and worked with them and I was using cut paper, showing them how to work with planes and so forth. I remember Hofmann was very, very irritated with my approach because although I had no intention of making it decorative, nevertheless, the inference was that this was a decorative approach to abstraction. In other words, he mainly had a spatial approach to abstraction, a strong spatial approach, a strong structural approach, a strong substantive approach. So when the critics made a connection between Hofmann's hard-edge painting and this new type of painting that was around like minimal painting, there was really no connection at all. I believe that Hofmann would have been very, very disenchanted with the work of men like [Kenneth] Noland, would have seen it as very, very decorative. He was always against decorative art.

MR. SANDLER: He later uses construction paper. Did you know that, George?

MR. MCNEIL: Well, see that's the strange thing about Hofmann. He kept changing throughout the years. So that the only Hofmann I can talk about is the one I knew in the 30s. Because I'm sure he was a different man in the 40s, and I'm sure he was a different man in the 50s, and even in the 60s.

MR. SANDLER: But he would have no real antipathy to students who worked in abstraction?

MR. MCNEIL: No. I'm trying to think now-this man Swinden I talked about, I'm sure he was working then. But no one had the idea of working with masking tape. That's interesting. I don't think masking tape was used until the very late 30s, like 1939 or so. I'm not even sure that it was around before-I know it was around in 1939, it might have been around in 1938. By the way, I was on the Project by this time. In 1935 I went on the WPA [Works Progress Administration] Art Project, like [Willem] de Kooning and [Ilya] Bolotowsky. Now I remember using masking tape. I took a kind of Neo-Impressionistic approach. I took a hard-edge approach to the mural.

MR. SANDLER: Is that the mural you worked on for several years with Penticof?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, Penticof, I think his name was. He had one part of the studio and I had the other part of the studio.

MR. SANDLER: And de Kooning was also working in this?

MR. MCNEIL: No, de Kooning was not working in that building.

MR. SANDLER: Or he had a big picture of de Kooning?

MR. MCNEIL: Penticof?

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: Maybe. Could very well be, I don't remember it though. Penticof was Lee Krasner's boyfriend at that time. I remember him in that relationship. He had the studio in the front and I think I would remember if de Kooning had been there. Or he might have had it in his apartment.

MR. SANDLER: Mmhmm [affirmative]. Well, the reason I asked is because so many of his students became members of the American Abstract Artists when it starts.

MR. MCNEIL: It was sympathetic.

MR. SANDLER: Yes. How would you estimate Hofmann's contribution to American painting in general aside from what you got from him? [Pause.] You were going to say?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, I was going to say that if anyone wants to make a point that Hofmann's teaching as a kind of solid contribution paved the way for the great American painting after 1945 I think they would be wrong. I think Hofmann was more spirit. I think he brought out the spirit of creativity with many people who worked with him—he was an older artist and they were younger artists, but I don't think that there's any body of knowledge. Like if you talked to Lee Krasner and got her idea of Hofmann, and you talked to Mercedes and got her idea of Hofmann, and you talked to Cavallon and got his idea I don't think there'd be any correspondence; I think they'd all say different things.

MR. SANDLER: They all would agree though on the idea of the man as a spirit?

MR. MCNEIL: Right. Right. Right.

MR. SANDLER: Because I had a long talk with Fritz Bultman very recently and he said pretty much the same thing you did about Hofmann; that it was an open situation, he probably got more from the student than he did from the old man because he wasn't around teaching that much.

MR. MCNEIL: That's right.

MR. SANDLER: I'd like to switch over to the WPA and your experience on it, George.

MR. MCNEIL: It was a very, very gratifying experience. I remember Mercedes told me something her father said, that every young painter needs about five years after he comes out of art school—let's say he comes out of art school when he's 22 or 23, he then needs five years of solid work in which to find himself, I suppose, you might say, to sort of counteract the influences of the art school. And that's what the Project did as far as many of the younger artists were concerned. Now when you talk about the WPA I think you can talk about the generation of 1910. In other words, although someone like [Philip] Guston I think was born in 1912 or 1914 and Kline 1910—Kline was not on the Project, but in any case they were all born plus or minus 1910. So that means that when the project started in 1935 we all had five or six years of this possibility for painting day in and day out. That doesn't mean that we weren't on picket lines and that doesn't mean that we weren't aggravated and we weren't humiliated by the various aspects of some kind of public relief project. Nevertheless, it was marvelous just in the sense of working day in and day out for five years. I was on the Project from 1935 until 1940 and I did a tremendous amount of work in that time. I worked on this very large mural maybe for two or three years treating it as an easel painting. And that meant when I came to large paintings later on I had not trouble with them at all.

MR. SANDLER: What effect at the time did the social realists and regionalists have?

MR. MCNEIL: Well, they dominated the whole scene. This is something else though that I can't convey to the young painters now. That is, that up until 1945 when I was thirty-seven, really it was a little bit later like 1946 and 1947 and 1948—in other words, until I was about forty years old I was always on the defensive about modern art. Then there were about ten years, let's say from 1950 to 1960, when the kind of work I was doing was clearly accepted and clearly dominant. Then almost since 1960 it's been again the same thing, you see, where I'm on the outside. But now I'm on the outside from the Left. Do you know what I mean?

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: In other words, the kind of work I'm doing now is considered conservative according to a certain kind of avant-gardism, you might say. But until 1945—say, between 1930 and 1945, the social scene painters completely dominated the scene. And now it's almost hard to think of the names of these people. They've practically completely disappeared.

MR. SANDLER: When you say "dominated", was it just, you know, the Depression and the social art or regionalist art that they did or was it also within the Project, was it difficult for modern artists—

MR. MCNEIL: Well, within the project, oh, it was extremely difficult. If it hadn't been for Diller, God knows what would have happened. If it hadn't been for Diller we would have been teaching or working in some kind of a craft program or something like that. Because, I would say, except for Diller there was no appreciation of modern art. That's the strange phenomenon of his having this important post. And Diller was always under-well, I don't know if he was under attack, but he was always on the defensive, that's for sure. Now when you say about social realism the strange thing is that their painting was maybe progressive in its content, in its illustration, but it was very, very conservative in style. So a social realist painter could easily turn—let us say, a man like [Philip] Evergood could easily turn from some kind of a social protest painting in a studio to some kind of historical mural in a high school, or a post office, or something like that. No trouble at all. We had no place at all.

MR. SANDLER: At this time, too, I guess the Mexicans were very much in favor?

MR. MCNEIL: Right. The Artists Union was the dominant center in this period. The Artists Union used to have meetings every week, every Wednesday night or whenever it was, and in the meetings you constantly go this propagandistic approach. The modern artists were suffered. They weren't completely ridiculed but they were treated as esthetes, as anti-social; they had to fight for everything at that time.

MR. SANDLER: And the organ of the Artists Union was *The Art Front*?

MR. MCNEIL: Right. So all you have to do is read *The Art Front* and you will find hardly any mention of modern art.

MR. SANDLER: You wrote a couple of articles.

MR. MCNEIL: No, I didn't.

MR. SANDLER: For *Art Front*? Or letters.

MR. MCNEIL: No, I don't think so. I don't remember doing anything. I wrote an article on Kandinsky which was rejected.

MR. SANDLER: Oh, I see.

MR. MCNEIL: I wrote an article on Kandinsky I don't know when-1933 or sometime like that. I still have it.

MR. SANDLER: But Léger would have played a-when he came here, because he was here several times during the 30s-

MR. MCNEIL: He didn't play any dominant role, no.

MR. SANDLER: But a curious role. Because he was also this type of modernist.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, but not because of that. The important thing about Léger is that we saw that these men who had been mythical were ordinary human beings. And very practical human beings. The strange thing is they were quite young at that time. In other words, Léger was then in the middle fifties. Very virile, active man. But he was only here in 1937 for a short time, like a month or so. And there again Diller arranged for the project with the French Line. We used to work with Léger. He had a little place somewhere in one of the WPA art buildings, I think it was 42nd Street. And we'd go up and show our work to him and talk about it. He didn't speak English at all. So we had a hard time.

MR. SANDLER: I want to get back to him later. The modern artists within the Project-

MR. MCNEIL: May I make a point though in relation to Léger which I've thought about since that time?

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: That is, that one of the things that's very strange is that we were all mixed up about what modern art was at that time. And now I think back and I think to myself, "How could we have been so unknowing?" I don't think we thought that Léger was miles apart from Matisse, or that maybe Léger was somewhat close to the Bauhaus but still not the Bauhaus. I think we all thought that there was a kind of pot called "modern art" and it didn't make any difference. Like Miró was modern art, Mondrian was modern art, Picasso was modern art, [Chaim] Soutine was modern art. I don't think we understood at that point that if you believe, let us say, in the Bauhaus approach it would be completely antithetical to Matisse. That there's almost nothing in common between the two. And I think now the young people understand this quite well. So the word "modern art" today is meaningless. You have to indicate what you mean by modern art. Because I know at that time I had the idea that if I didn't go to study with Hofmann, that I was going to study at the Bauhaus. How could I have been so stupid? I could have got there and gotten a completely wrong approach, a design approach, you might say. Very naïve. We were all quite naïve at this time.

MR. SANDLER: How did the modernist artist at that time-I guess most of them were on the Project-get together?

MR. MCNEIL: As part of the Artists Union they used to see each other a great deal. And then we got on the A.A.A., started in 1935-was it?

MR. SANDLER: Yes, it was 1935.

MR. MCNEIL: So then we met weekly from that point on and we got to know each other and then always had the

late evenings afterwards in cafeterias, you know. You can say that at some point around 1936, 1937, there was a very cohesive group of modern artists in New York centered around the A.A.A., and also in relation to the Project. They had two common cores. They had the core of the A.A.A. and the Art Project. And almost all of them were making murals. We all worked for Diller: Greene and his wife, Browne and his wife Rosalind.

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: However, people like Davis and Gorky who were then dominant on the scene-Matulka had some trouble with his hearing, I think, and you never saw Matulka around very much; and Graham I think was not-he may have been in New York but I think he was somewhat of an international man-but Davis and Gorky were clearly the leaders of the modern art movement, but they never were with these other men. So although actually Gorky was hardly any older than us he took a position of being an older figure like Davis. Davis was maybe twenty years older. Davis and Gorky were friends in this period, so when we used to meet together in the cafeterias Davis and Gorky would never be there. They were older figures like we speak of elder statesmen. Very respected figures.

MR. SANDLER: Yes. But with the A.A.A. there would have been a general shift on the part of a group, I guess there were-what-about three dozen of you really?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes.

MR. SANDLER: Away from a kind of Cubist semi-abstract to a complete non-objective art?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. Right. Complete non-objectivity. I was working at that time as an expressionist artist and I was also making these designs for the mural that I hoped to make. So I remember whenever I exhibited my expressionistic paintings to the A.A.A. they used to cause a great deal of displeasure-slight displeasure, you know. Ron Hultman [Hotlzman?] told me they used to say something like, "What the hell will we do with this thing?"

MR. SANDLER: So the orientation was really quite programmatically geometric abstraction?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. And that's what disturbs me so much. It was clearly hard-edge work. And these people who were so important in establishing this kind of style have been passed up recently, I mean someone like Bolotowsky.

MR. SANDLER: Or [Carl] Holty.

MR. MCNEIL: And Holty, and [Fritz] Glarner, and Diller. These men have such elegance in their work, such real refinement, so much more seriousness in their work, it seems to me, than the hard-edge stuff that you see around now, especially minimal art. They're almost ignored, and they're in their prime. That's the strangest thing.

MR. SANDLER: Yes. So the major influences on the geometric abstraction would have been men like Mondrian?

MR. MCNEIL: Mondrian. Right.

MR. SANDLER: How early is he really known?

MR. MCNEIL: Well, I knew about Mondrian certainly in relation to Diller. In other words, when I first knew Diller's work in around 1931, there's no doubt that I said to myself, "Mondrian". Oh, a very important influence in this period has to do with the *Cahiers d'Art*. We already knew what was going on in Paris because we used to get this magazine from Wise, I think it was, whenever it came out. We knew as much about it as the people in Paris did. And of course there were always exhibitions at the Museum of Modern Art. So I knew about Mondrian surely in 1931.

MR. SANDLER: And there were some in the Gallatin Collection, too, at N.Y.U. [New York University, New York, New York].

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. Oh, that's a very important thing. You see, we all lived downtown in the village and very often in the evenings we used to go over to N.Y.U. I did that very, very often. My studio was at 38 East Ninth Street and I remember going there evening after evening to see the work. And Léger's great painting of *The City* [1919] was there, you know.

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: But you see I was somewhat different in relation to the A.A.A. because I always worked specially. I always worked from nature in this period, freely, freely.

MR. SANDLER: Just a digression because I want to get back to the A.A.A. in a minute. There was a group of painters oriented to Paris at the time called The Ten that were more expressionist.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, they were oriented to French art, but they were quite social content in their work. You mean like Rothko [Marcus Rothkowitz (Mark Rothko)] and [Adolph] Gottlieb.

MR. SANDLER: Oddly enough, there were two A.A.A. members in that group. Bolotowsky showed with them.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. But that was in a different style completely. I'm quite sure he never showed any hard-edge work there. I'm quite sure. By 1935 I'm sure Bolotowsky was working in a Constructivist manner. Now Schanker never lost a certain kind of figuration. And if my work was out of place in the A.A.A., Schanker's work was even more out of place. And I would say Schanker was very much out of place with The Ten that you're talking about.

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: Joe Solomon was in The Ten, wasn't he?

MR. SANDLER: Yes, he was.

MR. MCNEIL: And a couple of others-Lou Harris.

MR. SANDLER: Lou Harris and [Jack] Kufeld.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, they were all subject matter painters, you know. They used to paint peddlers with a pushcart and that sort of thing. They were progressive. We felt closer to them than to other painters like-oh, I can't remember now who they would be-but we felt closer to people like Joe Solomon than we did to [William] Gropper. But there was the greatest difference between The Ten's work and the A.A.A.

MR. SANDLER: There was a great deal of curvilinear work being done by A.A.A. artists that wouldn't have been that close to Mondrian.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. Right.

MR. SANDLER: That would have been closer to Miró.

MR. MCNEIL: Right. That's what I call academic abstraction to a certain extent. Very close to what they were doing in Paris at the Nouvelles Réalités.

MR. SANDLER: And the Circle Eight.

MR. MCNEIL: I don't know that group.

MR. SANDLER: But Miró was known?

MR. MCNEIL: Miró was known but I don't think his work was influential except maybe in Gorky. I think Gorky was influenced by Miró. And I think de Kooning was influenced by Miró.

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: But I don't think Miró had any influence on the people connected with A.A.A.

MR. SANDLER: No, the reason I raise this question is because when I look at the old catalogues of the A.A.A. and think of possible sources of Parisian art, it seems like Miró would be the one. And yet he was identified with the Surrealists.

MR. MCNEIL: Maybe. I think I remember him as an isolated figure, that's all.

MR. SANDLER: The attitude would have been very much anti-surrealism at that time.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. You see, [Robert] Motherwell makes a big point about surrealism being a great influence on modern art. And this is always something incomprehensible to me because I would say before World War II, Surrealism had no influence at all, and there was even a kind of anti-influence I think. There were certain painters working in the Surrealist manner-there was Peter Blume, you might say.

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: And we all disliked that work very, very strongly. I'm sure we wouldn't even permit a Surrealist to be in the A.A.A.

MR. SANDLER: Well, Motherwell thinks of the abstract surrealists like-

MR. MCNEIL: [Andre] Masson?

MR. SANDLER: Masson, [Roberto] Matta. They weren't I'm sure known here?

MR. MCNEIL: Well, we knew about Masson for sure in the 30s. I'm trying to say that Masson was surely reproduced in *Cahiers d'Art*, so we knew about him. There might have been a work of his in the Gallatin Collection-I don't know. But I'm sure I knew about Masson in this period. Now when Surrealists came to America, and I suppose Motherwell met them as a young man---

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: He might say that he was influenced by them. But I would say that abstract expressionism came out of many, many forces of which a certain kind of Surrealism like Masson's was one of the extremes. But by and large my whole experience was strongly, strongly anti-Surrealist; the very antithesis of abstraction. Literary work-

MR. SANDLER: Hofmann would have had little sympathy, if any.

MR. MCNEIL: None, I would say.

MR. SANDLER: What about the Bauhaus?

MR. MCNEIL: Well, that was part of our being mixed up. I think we thought of the Bauhaus as a progressive force in relation to modern art without any of us being aware that they were really anti-painting. I don't think I knew this until maybe sometime after World War II. Never though about it. At some point I suddenly thought to myself, "My god, there wasn't one painter that came out of the Bauhaus." The fact that they had [Paul] Klee teaching there or [Wassily] Kandinsky teaching there didn't mean very much.

MR. SANDLER: Within A.A.A. there are two things that I want to ask you about: one, there was always this real controversy as to what constituted abstract art. And I think this kept certain figures, certain painters out of the organization who probably had more sympathy with the A.A.A. than with any other group of artists.

MR. MCNEIL: You mean someone like de Kooning?

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, but I think de Kooning stayed out because he was just an independent person and I think also he was influenced by Gorky who was a strongly independent person. And I think that's the only reason.

MR. SANDLER: There were those arguments at one point that the A.A.A. set up juries to actually pass on the-

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. Well, that was not so much that. I think that was because some people-now a man like Harry Bowden was doing work of a Matisse character, you might say. In other words, clearly figurative painting but not like Louis Schanker. Where Schanker would have lines which gave you figures but then all kinds of angles, Bowden was painting sort of in the Bonnard-Matisse-Cézanne tradition. And this unnerved many of the A.A.A. people. I can understand that. There was no place for Bowden to go. But it really wasn't abstract art if this was an abstract organization. Now in my work I guess there were elements of nature but never in that same sense, no.

MR. SANDLER: Within the A.A.A. there was a grouping that I've always wondered about. I think they called themselves Concretionists.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. That was the group around [George L.K.] Morris.

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: Morris and [Albert] Gallatin.

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: Morris and Gallatin and [Charles] Shaw, and Morris's wife, Frelinghuysen.

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: And they had an exhibition at some point-I think John Ferren might have been in that group too.

MR. SANDLER: I think so.

MR. MCNEIL: They had a show sometime around-I don't know when-1935, 1937 I think at the Pierre Matisse Gallery, if I remember correctly, where they just got together to show a kind of formal, geometric, hard-edge art which was kind of Mondrianesque in character. But it's very hard to describe this kind of painting-sort of geometric painting, you might say. A little bit like what Kandinsky did, say, after 1925 but not quite that either. They were a tight core as much as anything else because of their social background.

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: Ferren, by the way, was Ferren a member of the A.A.A. all though these years?

MR. SANDLER: No, he was in Paris for some of that time.

MR. MCNEIL: I think he came back maybe in 1938 or so. But was he in the A.A.A. after that period, do you know? I can't recall.

MR. SANDLER: I don't know that either. I think I remember a reproduction of his work in one of the catalogues. But I don't remember whether he was a member of the group.

MR. MCNEIL: I would say also that somewhat close to this group then would be Balcomb Greene and his wife. But I don't remember the other figures. On the one hand, there was a group of people like Byron Browne and myself-I don't remember the others-whose work was somewhat naturalistic in its composition; semi-abstract, you might say. Then there's this very interesting figure-Ralph Rosenborg.

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: Who really has not gotten any of the credit that is due to him. He was really doing abstract expressionist things.

MR. SANDLER: Yes. Somebody called [Hananiah] Harari was also-

MR. MCNEIL: Oh, yes, Harari. I think Harari was also working more or less in a semi-abstract way, in a semi-figurative way.

MR. SANDLER: Bu there was one gal-what was her name?-[Agnes] Lyall?-

MR. MCNEIL: I remember the name but I can't remember the work.

MR. SANDLER: -who was also working in a kind of expressionist vein, or at least according to one of the reproductions I saw.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, that's right. I was very distasteful to the Concretionist group. It bothered them very, very much.

MR. SANDLER: [Jean] Helion was around in the country at that time.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, he was around.

MR. SANDLER: Did you know him at all?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, I met him. I didn't know him well. I just met him. He was around in 1937 and 1938, I would say. I think he exerted some kind of an influence also at this time. I admired his work very much. He had a painting in the Gallatin Collection, I think, a painting about 1934, which was quite, quite good.

MR. SANDLER: I have one painting of 1937 in my office which is a beauty. It's part of the N.Y.U. Collection.

MR. MCNEIL: It's such a pity to me that he left his kind of work.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1; BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 2]

MR. SANDLER: This is side two of the tape with George McNeil. A couple of things that I wanted to ask you about this period. The two Europeans who would have been here, you know, at the time would have been, I guess, Léger and Helion.

MR. MCNEIL: Right.

MR. SANDLER: And I just wondered what you remembered of Léger because there was a period that you worked

with him.

MR. MCNEIL: What I remember about him is that he worked like a commercial artist. He used to cut out his shapes and pin them up on the wall. He worked with cut paper and he was a completely matter-of-fact man about his work. In other words, eh would cut out pieces of colored paper and pin them up. Which was basically a design approach. Hofmann had always been anti-this design approach and working toward a more substantial kind of form. And I remember being very, very shocked at seeing what he did. You know, it's as though you go to Parnassus [Mount Parnassus, Greece] and somebody discovers someone with a shopping list or something like that. I don't remember too much. He was a very democratic man. Like you say, he was interested in radicalism. And he was interested in the poorer side of New York like Fourteenth Street and that sort of thing.

MR. SANDLER: De Kooning also mentioned this working like a commercial artist once to me, and I remember he begrudgingly said, after he had made all these drawings that he still did, "Oh, well, he always chose the best one to put on canvas." On that French Line pier perfect there would have been yourself, Mercedes-

MR. MCNEIL: De Kooning.

MR. SANDLER: De Kooning, Byron Browne. Was Bowden on it?

MR. MCNEIL: Bowden could very well have been on it, yes. I rather think he was.

MR. SANDLER: And it lasted for a couple of weeks?

MR. MCNEIL: Two weeks, yes.

MR. SANDLER: And your feeling was that the thing that emerged was sort of Léger the great master becoming a human being?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, suddenly becoming a human being. But something else came out of that which I've never forgotten-a human interest element also. That was that while Hofmann had his school in this period of the 30s he was quite poor. It was sort of a desperate situation. He was never hungry or anything like that, but he sure wasn't affluent. I'm sure that Hofmann envied all the people who were on the Project at that time. Now when Léger came and worked in relation with the Project it suddenly was noised around that Léger was going on the Project. I remember Hofmann saying something like, "Léger going on the Project?!" as though, like, you know, why hadn't he gotten on the Project also? So I remember the complete astonishment of Hofmann, you know, that Léger could have been doing this kind of work. But, of course, there was nothing in it. Léger maybe would have been an adviser or something like that.

MR. SANDLER: Yes. Diller told me that he was hoping to use Léger to put abstract artists to work and he thought Léger's name would carry some weight because he said he was having difficulty in finding murals for abstract artists.

MR. MCNEIL: Assignments, yes.

MR. SANDLER: But there was a whole comedy of errors there. It turned out the exact reverse.

MR. MCNEIL: I think the French Line officials were not too entranced with the idea.

MR. SANDLER: Oh, no, absolutely not. At one point, if I remember correctly, when Diller finally tried to straighten it out they were absolutely horrified because they always considered him a Communist. Although I understand then that he really wasn't.

MR. MCNEIL: Well, I think he was a real radical.

MR. SANDLER: He was radical?

MR. MCNEIL: I think he was as close to the Communist Party as you could be. I don't know if he carried a card. But I think he was really a Communist, yes. I remember that he used to talk in that way. I remember he once told a human interest story about how in England they taught dogs to bark at men who wore caps.

MR. SANDLER: Is it true? Did you hear this story that Léger came to America because he figured to himself that in Paris he had been selling a lot to Americans and he may as well come to where his collectors were, but once he got here they wouldn't buy his pictures anymore?

MR. MCNEIL: Well I don't know anything about that but he sure was practical as far as money matters were concerned because when he was here later, after the war broke out in 1940, I had been to Cuba and when I returned I remember seeing him at the Matter's and he asked me if they bought pictures in Cuba. I remember

being shocked by that also.

MR. SANDLER: The Matters-I mean, people met in their house?

MR. MCNEIL: I guess so, yes. I think he stayed with the Matters up on 42nd Street.

MR. SANDLER: About some of the other figures, you know, many of them who aren't I guess too well remembered, or not much about them remembered, did you know John Graham at all?

MR. MCNEIL: No. No.

MR. SANDLER: Have you read his book?

MR. MCNEIL: What was his book called?

MR. SANDLER: *System and Dialectics of Art*.

MR. MCNEIL: When was that written?

MR. SANDLER: I think it was published in 1937.

MR. MCNEIL: No. I have a vague memory of that in the 1940s as one of the books I must get to read sometime, but I don't think it had much currency here. Because if the other artists had been talking about it then I would have wanted to read it myself. But I think Graham did not exercise any kind of an influence on the younger artists in this period. You knew that he had been important and you knew that he was important in the art world but he didn't have the same role that Gorky and Davis had. I mean they were producing like crazy at this time. And you saw their work around, too.

MR. SANDLER: You didn't see de Kooning's work?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, I knew de Kooning in this period after 1936 or 1937, so you would see it around. They would have exhibitions on the Project from time to time. There was an exhibition called "New Horizons of American Art" at the Museum of Modern Art I think in 1937 and I remember de Kooning's work was there. Mine was, too. There's a point which is very important and that is that de Kooning always had a peer position from the very beginning of modern art. He was always, as far as I know, respected as a tremendously important painter.

MR. SANDLER: How would you assess the 30s experience? In other words, thinking perhaps a little in advance to what happened in the 40s, what is your feeling?

MR. MCNEIL: I don't think it had much influence on the 40s. You see there is a strange phenomenon about what happened afterwards-the leading figures like [Jackson] Pollock-

MR. SANDLER: Did you know Pollock in the 30s?

MR. MCNEIL: No, I didn't know Pollock until after the war actually. I saw him around 1943, I guess, with Lee. They were going out together at that time. I saw him and I only knew him as Lee Krasner's boyfriend. I think I knew who he was. He had painted; well, we know the paintings he made at that time. So I didn't know him personally, no. So Pollock was an important figure. And other people like Rothko, they had not been doing this kind of work, you know, most of them, I guess-Guston and [James] Brooks and all the others-and [Jack] Tworkov, they had not been in the abstract movement in the 30s so it's a very interesting thing that the people who had been active in the 30s, except for Gorky and de Kooning and David Smith and [Ibram] Lassaw and people like that, they were superseded in a strange way by the freer kind of abstract expressionistic painting which came in at that time.

MR. SANDLER: To put my question in another way: why did the A.A.A. decline?

MR. MCNEIL: Why did it decline?

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: I think there was a basic academicism there from the beginning, a design approach from the very, very beginning. And I think the same thing will happen with this hard-edge painting that you see today. I don't think there's any deep basis for it. I think the painters themselves will get bored with what they're doing. You know they come to sort of black walls in a certain sense. We didn't talk about [Ad] Reinhardt-he was always active there. It's true he was not doing hard-edge painting as I remember. It didn't fit in; I can't remember where it fitted in.

MR. SANDLER: Well, in the 30s he was working a kind of, oh, somewhere between Holty and Mondrian and

particularly Davis.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, I guess so.

MR. SANDLER: Because I've seen those abstractions, his 30s abstractions. It's only in the early 40s that he loosens up.

MR. MCNEIL: I see. Oh, I don't remember that.

MR. SANDLER: But the A.A.A. you would say does play a role in, say, proselytizing for modern art?

MR. MCNEIL: Right.

MR. SANDLER: Certainly for creating an audience for it?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, I suppose it did that. But I think the main thing is that it gave us a certain kind of community in the 30s. We were able to lean on each other like a person who goes to a strange city, you know; I mean, they go down to Delaware, let's say, and there's absolutely no one in Delaware to talk to. So that's what it was in the early 1930s to a great extent. Then in the second half of the 30s we had a great deal of camaraderie and a great deal of mutual reinforcement. So we all worked like the devil even though we were rejected by the official art world. You see that's a strange thing, the Museum of Modern Art had very little interest in American abstract art. In other words, they were interested in social content art in the 1930s while they went to Europe, you know, and bought the European stuff. It was perfectly all right to buy European abstract art but they didn't encourage the American work. And you have to omit someone like Marin because he was above the scene, as you might say.

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: But I would say that someone like Arthur Carles probably suffered from this kind of American parochialism. So that's the main thing. I'm sure that the painters in the A.A.A. despised each other's work but we all got a great deal of stimulation from each other. I remember the first time I heard that David Smith was working in iron, which much have been around 1933. I thought to myself, why in God's name does he have to pick on iron? Why such a strange material to work with?

MR. SANDLER: There's one thing that we sort of missed and I want to get back to this when we meet again: the importance of Cubism to you. Because that's always been, I guess, central?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. It's been central in the sense that when I was young, say, until I was about thirty years old, I thought that Cubism represented a kind of structural approach to painting, kind of drama of painting, and that you could learn a great deal from it. But now I think I was very, very much mistaken. I wrote this review, you remember, for Rosenberg's book.

MR. SANDLER: [Robert] Rosenblum, I think.

MR. MCNEIL: Rosenblum's book about five years ago I guess. And it caused Rosenblum some pain, I guess. I wrote there adversely about Cubism because it seemed to me that it was the beginning of the academicization of modern art, of thinking that modern art could be made. And as far as I'm concerned this error sort of deepened and deepened and deepened until abstract expressionism came along.

MR. SANDLER: Well, that was one of the reasons I guess for the popularity of Cubism. It did give you a way of modern art.

MR. MCNEIL: Of course. You could lean on it and study it and talk about it, and so forth, and so forth. So I think it led to something of a cul de sac or else it pushed art in the wrong direction as far as I'm concerned. It made people think that art was a making experience, a constructive experience. And while Mondrian did that marvelously well, and others have done it well, I think basically it has been a negative force on modern art to think that art can be made, that you just make it, you just put it together. I think that's basically, basically wrong. And later on if we talk about ideas we can talk about that.

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: I'm trying to write something on that now.

MR. SANDLER: One more thing, George. Where does the expressionist strain in your work-how does that enter in?

MR. MCNEIL: I don't know. I don't know.

MR. SANDLER: Because that's one of the things that in a sense did separate you in the 1930s. Many people I've spoken to have commented on it.

MR. MCNEIL: I don't know really. It's an interesting thing. Because when I first started to paint in a modern way I worked-that is, in 1929-I did some very, very free paintings, extraordinarily free paintings. But I think in the back of my mind there was always a stupid idea, which everybody had at that time, that art could be learned. But I think everybody thought that if you'd study with somebody, you'd learn how to paint. I think I thought at that time that I could analyze Giotto, I could analyze Cézanne, I could analyze Picasso and these other figures and then become a modern artist. And that's what makes me so irritable now about Cubism. Because it seemed to have that all there. That seemed to be in Cubism. So I think I vacillated between a kind of emotional approach to painting, which was native to me, and then a kind of concept that I had that art could be learned, could be studied. And when I worked with Hofmann I think the two trends were there also: that Hofmann was at once expressionistic and he was Cubistic. A strange kind of contradiction. But I know that almost from the very beginning-in other words, I think I probably made planal drawings with Hofmann for about four or six months. And then I know I worked toward a free kind of drawing or painting, somewhat free drawing and painting. And especially the drawings. I have those drawings. Very free drawings.

MR. SANDLER: Do you want to call it a day?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes.

MR. SANDLER: This is the end of the first interview with George McNeil.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 2; BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE 1]

MR. SANDLER: This is the second interview with George McNeil. Last time we talked pretty much about the 30s. We didn't go into the 40s at all. But just to start us off-and although this might be a little bit repetitive-what in your mind were the reasons for the decline, say, of the American Abstract Artists, the whole orientation of geometric abstraction?

MR. MCNEIL: Well, I keep thinking about that because it seems that in the last few years there has been a revival of Constructivism.

MR. SANDLER: There'll be a big Bauhaus show next year, you know.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. It's all part of the same thing. And what seems very strange to me is that the men and women like Glarner and Bolotowsky-I can't think of any women offhand-who were doing so much work in the 30s, Constructivist work, and then continued to do it all through the 40s and 50s, and in the 60s, that they have somehow been ignored. Now with the development of Constructivism, which I guess caught hold with the Op Art Show-"The Responsive Eye"-

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: We have had what now goes under the name of hard-edge painting. I talk always from the viewpoint of an expressionist painter, which is a prejudiced one, and it seems to me that why this work did not fulfill itself as much as it could have was the lack of feeling in it. I see the same thing with the hard-edge painting which is coming on today-there's a feeling of scientism, of construction, that you put a picture together. And in the end it doesn't work as far as I can see. You remember that Rosenblum wrote that book on Cubism I think in 1962 or 1963 [*Cubism and Twentieth-Century Art*, 1960].

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: Anyway, I wrote a review for *Art News* at that time and I tried to make the point there that in spite of the fact that cubism had such a momentous importance in the development of modern art, it was essentially to me a blind alley development because of its concern with Constructivism and this thing of invention, of putting things together. Now I guess this comes from what you might call the classical viewpoint if you go back into history. You know the classical artists did that. They very consciously composed. And it might be that the Constructivists are just simply following the same principle. But I find a lack of life. I find that Cubism deteriorated. As far as Picasso was concerned, I don't think it ever fulfilled itself. And Braque became a maker of tasteful things, you might say. So in general when you talk about the American Abstract Artists and geometric form, it seems to me that it's a putting together of things and somewhat mechanical, somewhat lacking in spirit, and it just doesn't seem to me to have come through. And then again it gets to be awfully thin. A lot of this Op Art that you see now seems to me to be right on the surface. For all of these reasons I'm just very, very surprised at the interest shown in it. If it had any faults, these faults are carried to an extreme in minimal art, which seems to me to be just nothing, just about as close to nothing in art, just as close to arrant decoration as you possibly can get.

MR. SANDLER: But was there anything, say, around 1940, or, say, from 1940 to 1944-

MR. MCNEIL: Well, first of all, these were the war years so a great many people were away. I stopped working in about 1940 or 1941 and took a job as a draftsman and then I went away into the Navy. So from 1941 to 1946 I was just out of circulation. Although I heard of things happening. Someone told me about Pollock I guess around 1943. And I knew he was going out with Lee Krasner I guess that time.

MR. SANDLER: And you were always a friend of Lee's?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, I was always a friend of Lee's. But otherwise I was just out of things.

MR. SANDLER: How do you now assess the change when you got back, in retrospect? For example, how would you see the role of Surrealism during the 40s?

MR. MCNEIL: Not at all! Not at all. I don't see Surrealism having any influence whatsoever. And when Motherwell talks about it having so much importance in the development of abstract art, I don't know what he's talking about. I really don't. I know that people like Pollock and [William] Baziotes, maybe Gottlieb-I don't know, [Peter] Busa, they were influenced by Surrealism I think in these years to a certain extent.

MR. SANDLER: Rothko, Gottlieb.

MR. MCNEIL: Rothko, right.

MR. SANDLER: Bolotowsky.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. There was an influence of Surrealism. That was afterward, by the way. In other words, say from 1943 onward maybe-I'm not quite sure-the influence of Masson on Pollock is clear. But that's not real surrealism when you think of Dalí. So, in other words, I see them as being antipathetic. I see the abstract art development of the 30s and 40s, as far as abstract expressionism is concerned, going always toward form significance, and Surrealism goes toward literary significance.

MR. SANDLER: You get back from the service in 1946. What happens then?

MR. MCNEIL: Well, that's a very exciting thing. Now I was in the Navy stationed in Washington. So I knew a little bit of what was going on. I knew about Pollock, for example. And I knew the work that Hofmann was doing. So I think when all of us came back in 1946, like Jim Brooks, for example, that there was a tremendous ferment. All the abstract art which had been to my mind relatively doctrinaire, you know, this constructivist work, opened up and you had the wonderful work that Pollock and de Kooning were doing, and then later on, Kline of course. So it was a tremendously stimulating period. Everyone had sort of compressed a lot of energy in these years and it was all ready to come out. And it did. So I would say this was one of those great periods like 1905 for Fauvism and 1909 for Cubism.

MR. SANDLER: Did you make contact with these-?

MR. MCNEIL: I didn't know them in a comradely way. I just knew what they were doing more or less. I never visited their studios.

MR. SANDLER: But later did you go to The Club?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. Later I go to The Club. The Club I guess starts right-when did The Club start? The Club started in 1948, right?

MR. SANDLER: In 1948.

MR. MCNEIL: Now there's another interesting thing. And that is, I was not in New York from 1946 to 1948. I was out in Wyoming at Laramie teaching at the university there. But the summer of 1947 I was back in New York. I remember my wife and children-my wife and girl stayed out at Springs. So I visited them, you know, and saw Lee and Jackson.

MR. SANDLER: What is your work like when you begin painting? I assume you begin intensively in 1946.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes.

MR. SANDLER: Do you pick up from the kind of-?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, now I'll show you some things that I have slides of. I'm not quite sure what happens but I knew I did some free collages at some point. That is maybe 1944. When I was in the Navy I worked with small things

in the evenings. Then when I got out in 1946 I was working really in two directions-one worked toward a kind of severe abstraction, very clearly defined abstractions. And then I worked form nature in gouache, and that was expressionistic. So the period 1946-1947 is one when I'm sort of on to myself. And when I say that there was this great sort of enthusiasm, maybe I should make it 1948 instead of 1946 because when I came back to New York in 1948 I remember, well, my work was always, you know, basically structural, always had a structural foundation to it. So they're somewhat structured abstractions. Then they keep getting freer and freer all the time. I had my first show at Egan's [Charles Egan Gallery, New York] in 1950.

MR. SANDLER: And those abstractions were-they were abstract?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes.

MR. SANDLER: I've only seen a few of those; I wasn't on the scene in 1950. Bu they were open forms?

MR. MCNEIL: They were open forms-not completely open forms, but tending to be open. I think the Museum of Modern Art had some big exhibition-didn't they-in 1951 or something like that, 1952? Of abstract art in America?

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: Well, I had a painting in that and I think it was reproduced in the catalogue.

MR. SANDLER: That's the one that I believe Ritchie did?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. Right. So it's tending to be a free form but it's not really free; there's always a measure or beat in the work.

MR. SANDLER: How would you assess the impact from your vantage point that, say, Pollock made?

MR. MCNEIL: I think it was astounding. I think it was just phenomenal. I think it's almost a kind of mystical thing the way this guy opened up everything. So this is why I consider him to be the most important artist as far as the Americans were concerned. Because it seems to me that painting had gotten more and more dead from Cubism, from the period of Cubism. All you have to do is look at French art in the period to see that it was sort of chic and decorative. American abstract art had gotten very, very Constructivist. So this guy came along and he really picked up where people like Kandinsky had left off in 1912 or 1913 or 1914 or some period that literally was abstract expressionism. Now when I say my work was somewhat constructive I think the same thing was true with de Kooning and Hofmann also, you see.

MR. SANDLER: Yes, I was going to ask about de Kooning. Because he had more of the-

MR. MCNEIL: And I think Pollock did this for everybody, showed a certain possibility for freedom in these years. It was an extraordinary thing.

MR. SANDLER: Then freedom and directness would have been key values?

MR. MCNEIL: I was working expressionistically in the 30s always.

MR. SANDLER: Yes. But still within the constructive-

MR. MCNEIL: Always within a structural framework, you might say. In other words, Cubism was always in me somewhere quite strong. And then Pollock comes along and sort of has the other attitude like non-form. Which was very, very refreshing. Because the tendencies for constructivism are as strongly toward academicism, they're strongly toward restraints as far as I see it. And I think with a lot of this minimal art now you just have a kind of new academy, you know; the stuff can be taught quite easily.

MR. SANDLER: Do you remember the position you took at The Club in 1952? It was one of the strongest statements of "if any form is established then it is our function to disestablish it."

MR. MCNEIL: I don't remember saying that so early, but I believe that very strongly.

MR. SANDLER: It was in 1952. There were some notes taken that came into my possession. As a matter of fact, you were attacked at the time by Tworkov. He said your position sounded entirely too doctrinaire in its desire to overthrow any established or existing form.

MR. MCNEIL: Well, I don't know what I intended to say then, but I can say right now that-well, like everybody says it, art is always coming into being and it's the purpose of the artist always to renew things. And it has to be that way. There can't be any principles. There can't be any standards. It's only the spirit of art which is constant

always. The form always keeps changing.

MR. SANDLER: But yet you were never willing-and I remember other times we've talked, this has always sort of been a conflict in your work-you were never willing to give up what used to be called plastic values in art.

MR. MCNEIL: Right.

MR. SANDLER: So it's somehow a tension between this freedom and-

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. That's what I call the legitimacy of art-that the work really comes into being through form and the proof of it is in the form, and the form must be there. There's a great deal of talking today about intentions and yet when you look at the form it's so pitiful, it's so weak, it's so insignificant that it's ridiculous. That's why I can't understand this thing about Surrealism, because it seems to me that Surrealism is anti-form.

MR. SANDLER: Well, how would Gorky fit into this?

MR. MCNEIL: Well, it's complex, you know. I can't remember-there's some kind of a saying that-well, I'm trying to say that a man succeeds because he fails; or someone succeeds because they were fortunate enough to do the wrong thing rather than the right thing. I think in these years when Gorky was mixed up with Surrealism it was essentially a drawing concept which he sort of established into his painting or inserted into his painting. Nevertheless, he worked it out. He made it work. And he found himself in the years, say, from 1942 to 1946 and 1947. He might have had wrong premises based on Surrealism, but they worked as far as he was concerned. So, you know, this is the wonderful thing about art. Pollock did all the wrong things also. He worked with the wrong teachers, you know, [David Alfaro] Siqueiros and [Thomas Hart] Benton, the worst people you can think of. And it worked out.

MR. SANDLER: Would you also except Miró from this?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, but Miró is an example of decline. Like I said that Gorky wrote things into his painting or he inserted things into his painting. You say do I believe in a plastic basis. It's because of something like this. I believe in the totality of the form and I don't think you can have one approach which is form-making and then sort of insert things like ideas; you insert ideas into the painting. I think Miró was quite wonderful up maybe to the early 40s when his work did have a kind of total integrity. But he loses that and then he begins to sort of write things on the surface of the painting. Then I think it gets to be somewhat trivial in character. I don't know the recent work that he's done but I remember there was a show at the Museum of Modern Art and I thought it was very, very depressing to see that he hadn't carried through. Because they never had a plastic basis for their art. On the other hand, Matisse who has nothing, no content, no literary work, no literary ideas at all, not an idea in any painting of his, he does have this strong plastic sense and he goes on and goes on and goes on to make more and more magnificent things.

MR. SANDLER: George, the artists that you felt closest to in the late 40s were Pollock and I guess de Kooning, too.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes.

MR. SANDLER: What about guys like Rothko or [Clyfford] Still?

MR. MCNEIL: No, I was never interested in their work. I really am not now interested in their work. I see it as a kind of decoration. I consider Matisse and Mondrian to be like high decorators, the greatest decorators like sometimes you talk about Veronese as being a great decorator. In that sense I have the greatest respect for Mondrian and Matisse.

MR. SANDLER: You put Mondrian in with Matisse as a great decorator?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. I know it's a funny thing but I'll explain why. On the other hand, when you come to these people like Still particularly, to me it's just, you know, fine decoration without any kind of real experience there; no real experience as far as I can see.

MR. SANDLER: What about [Barnett] Newman?

MR. MCNEIL: I don't even consider him at all. I mean I wish this were not being recorded, but I think that's just nothing, absolutely nothing. It's a continual mystery to me that his work is taken seriously. I just can't understand it.

MR. SANDLER: This, of course, you can just have anything you want-have the tape withheld if there's anything-

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, I think it should be because when you're dealing with your colleagues there's no sense in

backbiting and meanness; and I don't mean it to be that, but I just consider that to be a complete I don't know what to say-complete lack of criticism as far as he is concerned.

MR. SANDLER: How did you and Egan get together?

MR. MCNEIL: I don't really know. Oh, I guess I took some stuff to show Egan at some point between 1943 and 1950. And then either The Club or the prelude to The Club was in operation at that time, wasn't it?

MR. SANDLER: There were these Friday night meetings at the school that Motherwell-

MR. MCNEIL: Right. So I must have got to know him socially in this period.

MR. SANDLER: Did you go to the Waldorf at all?

MR. MCNEIL: Not really. I mean, from time to time. But I was living in Brooklyn here so it wasn't as though I dropped in and so forth.

MR. SANDLER: What was he like?

MR. MCNEIL: Oh, he was quite wonderful, naturally. And still is quite wonderful.

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: This is one of the great tragedies of the whole modern art movement, that he fostered so many of these men and then all the fruits were taken by somebody else, you know. He sowed them and cultivated them and then somebody else harvested them. So it's a very sad thing. Thank God he has [Reuben] Nakian.

MR. SANDLER: Yes. And I guess Raoul Haig, too.

MR. MCNEIL: Oh, yes, Haig also. But Haig was not in that group at that time. Nakian was. But he certainly was the most important dealer, I would say, as far as the New York School was concerned in the sense of taking people whom the other galleries wouldn't take at that time. They wouldn't take any chances with them. When you consider that he gave Cavallon a show in 1946 or 1947, you can see what I'm talking about. And I think he gave de Kooning his first one-man show, didn't he?

MR. SANDLER: De Kooning, yes, and Kline. And yourself, and-oh, gosh-

MR. MCNEIL: Probably other people. Tworlov I guess had exhibited in the 30s.

MR. SANDLER: Oh, yes, he had earlier. That's true. Was there any kind of a scene around the Gallery? Did the people know one another?

MR. MCNEIL: No, there was a friendship but it centered more in The Club or whatever was the precedent there. I guess Charlie was too good-natured and too human in these years. In other words, he was too friendly with the artists, you might say, in a way. So he was very unique in that sense and he was very close to de Kooning and Kline. But I never really was in the heart of the art world. I was always sort of on the periphery of what was going on in New York. I used to go to New York once a week, on Tuesday night or Friday night or whatever it was, and I had the most cordial relations with those people. But it wasn't as though I was living on Ninth Street and then I went into the automat, you know, on Broadway or one of those cafeterias and somebody else would come in and chat like that. I never had that closeness.

MR. SANDLER: How would you assess from your vantage point the role The Club plays?

MR. MCNEIL: Oh, I think it was enormously important, enormously important.

MR. SANDLER: What did it do?

MR. MCNEIL: Well, there was this thing of culture, you know, of like a city; and The Club did for New York what the cafes did in Paris all through the late 19th and 20th centuries. They created a kind of-I'm trying to say something-milieu, of course, but I'm trying to say they created a medium where the ideas of the artist came into conflict with each other and got beaten out, sort of hammered out and changed in this process, and then everybody stimulates everybody else. In other words, I don't believe in ideas in painting itself, but I believe very much in the ideas as a stimulus or stimuli to painting. And that's what happened in these years, in a wonderful, wonderful way. Everybody was like within a half a mile of Eighth Street and University Place and they came together and sort of got stimulated and then went back to their studios and worked, and came back together and then went to their studios to work. There was sort of a fermentation of ideas.

MR. SANDLER: I forgot who it was who said it was a good place to get rid of bad ideas, too.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, I guess that's a nice thought also like hangovers from the 30s. And a lot of these painters had been rooted in representation so they got those ideas out of their system in those years.

MR. SANDLER: There wouldn't have been any programmatic opposition to figuration in painting?

MR. MCNEIL: No, but it was practically taken for granted that-like you would have been considered a square if you painted the figure, say, from 1950 to 1953 in the way that the figure is being painted today, you know, where there's great reliance on it, demonstrative reliance on it. Everybody was so much enmeshed in form and abstraction. That's a period which is very interesting because drawing dropped out of the picture, you might say, from about 1948 to about 1958. No one was drawing. Because they had been drawing the figure.

MR. SANDLER: You mean instead of drawing-

MR. MCNEIL: No, everybody was painting.

MR. SANDLER: Direct painting?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. You see, that's another thing about Cubism and Constructivism. It has its basis in drawing. It has its basis in planning. So this I think in these years was considered a kind of detriment or an obstacle to going ahead with free painting. It hindered you, it blocked you. So there wasn't much drawing in these years. And then, of course, around 1958 or so people got tired of just a kind of explosion of energy and they became interested more in a closed form to a certain extent. I think a lot of young kids by that time had gotten on to abstract expressionism as a kind of-what-you know, kind of game, something that you played with. They were the ones who poured the paint. And they did all the wrong things. In other words, when someone like Pollock had poured paint it was the wrong thing for him to pour it also; but it worked. But when they poured it, it was wrong and it didn't work, you know-a lot of nonsense throwing paint round. So I think that somehow disenchanting the older painters.

MR. SANDLER: In other words, they lost the tension with the-

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, they really only made designs then with the paint, I would say. And they did lose some kind of tension-that's a good word-either psychological or spatial or whatever it was.

MR. SANDLER: You used the word "energy" before. That would have been a value that artists wanted in their painting-

MR. MCNEIL: Right.

MR. SANDLER: As against the-

MR. MCNEIL: Right. As against the intellectual concept of sort of measuring the space like the Cubists did, and planning it. That's the great thing that Pollock and de Kooning and Hofmann, all the expressionist painters brought back a certain energy into painting which had been lost when there had been so much concern with Constructivism, you know, so much of a mental approach to the work.

MR. SANDLER: And it would have been, I guess, the ideas I imagine particularly of de Kooning-

MR. MCNEIL: Pollock more and the energy of Pollock.

MR. SANDLER: Yes, but I mean at The Club?

MR. MCNEIL: Do you think so?

MR. SANDLER: I don't know.

MR. MCNEIL: He never was too vocal there. I think even Kline was more vocal. But all these ideas were common I would say at that time. And then it wasn't so much ideas maybe as enthusiasm, you know. I remember Kline dancing with-what's the Ward girl's name?

MR. SANDLER: Oh, Nancy?

MR. MCNEIL: Nancy. And I remember the two of them dancing together. And, God, that would be enough to give you ideas. There was just so much fun there.

MR. SANDLER: This is something that has come up. The Club is just a socializing place which many people seem

to think was really one of the important functions.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. But they also always had these panels. They always argued and talked about things. And they had these exhibitions from time to time.

MR. SANDLER: You were in the Ninth Street Show?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, I guess I was. And then they had something at the Stable Gallery, didn't they?

MR. SANDLER: Yes. Later. Do you have any recollections of the Ninth Street Show, George? Reactions to it?

MR. MCNEIL: No, not really. No. But I certainly wish there'd be something like that now where a lot of people could just take their work and show it and then let the work be seen on its merits. You know like minimal painting. Put the minimal painting up against the painting of a man like de Kooning, for example, and just see.

MR. SANDLER: There have been attempts made recently but they weren't made in the right way. They were made in a sort of defensive way which people instinctively shied away from. In other words, people who'd like to do this kind of show haven't yet figured out a way to just present it straight without-

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. Present a complete cross-section of what's being done. The Whitney Museum should be doing that and I guess it does it better than anybody else. But it doesn't seem to work out there in such a way-I didn't see the last show but they tell me it was a lot of hard-edge painting.

MR. SANDLER: Yes. The emphasis, the stress was there. I'm trying to sort of get in some more about The Club, you know, recollections that you might have about the role it plays.

MR. MCNEIL: I can't think of anything either. In the late 1930s the Abstract Artists used to have a meeting once a week or once every two weeks or whatever it was, and that always made for a certain kind of stimulation.

MR. SANDLER: They were still at The Club, though, some carry-overs from the American Abstract Artists attitude, like Reinhardt, for example.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes.

MR. SANDLER: [Harry] Holtzman used to come quite frequently.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes.

MR. SANDLER: I imagine Diller would show up rarely?

MR. MCNEIL: Very rarely. I don't ever remember him being there. Practically never. It would be Reinhardt and Holtzman like you say. And they were two very literate men. Harry of course still is. And they would have a certain kind of influence, maybe doctrinaire influence. There was always some pretext for having panels. They went on week after week after week, didn't they, at The Club?

MR. SANDLER: That's right. I guess almost every week.

MR. MCNEIL: Now I can't really remember who ever talked so much there, but they did. And I would imagine more informally than the present Club does.

MR. SANDLER: The present Club, I don't really understand it, but it turns people off rather than turns them on the times I went. I haven't been there in the last month. But that was my feeling. In 1951, say, both Bill de Kooning and Pollock begin to paint figurative or quasi-figurative work. What was the reaction to that among Club people?

MR. MCNEIL: I don't remember what the reaction was. I'm thinking really what my reaction is.

MR. SANDLER: What was your reaction? That's the question.

MR. MCNEIL: I can't remember anyone reacting on it. I can't remember that anybody thought they were sort of deserting the movement or anything like that. Which would have been silly, of course. My own reaction is that it worked in the opposite direction. In other words, de Kooning's work got enormously rich in those years. And to me, that's his best period, say, from 1950 to 1955 when he was working with *The Women*. And with Pollock I think it's something entirely different. Pollock was grasping at something; in other words, the figure is always there. It seems to be a basic kind of resource that artists turn to in times of difficulty. And he did it. But he didn't do it in any convincing way. I think those big Picassoesque heads that he did at this time are simply enlarged drawings. They could have been made 12 inches by 16 inches as well as large. So I think he was trying to find his

way out. And those I think are thin. Whereas de Kooning's work, I think that's just about the best American painting that was ever made-*The Women* series. So I think they were enormously fruitful, enormously positive and productive.

MR. SANDLER: How does your own work veer towards a kind of figurative-

MR. MCNEIL: Well I've often thought about that myself. We started to draw at some point around 1958. In other words, Mercedes I think was the center of it always. It's funny how you forget things. I can't remember where it started.

MR. SANDLER: I think Philip Pearlstein, Charles Cajori.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, I think they might have been there at that date. I seem to remember them a little bit later after 1960. But I think actually as early as 1958 there might have been a group of people drawing. In any case they were drawing by 1960. So we were then drawing the figure in those years. But it seems to me that my work has always had not a human figure image, but it always had a figural image. There always seems to be some kind of center image in the picture-right smack in the center there seems to be some kind of form. And that is figural, or imagistic. And it just happens that around some point after 1960-I think my first show at the Wise Gallery [Staley-Wise Gallery, New York, New York] in 1960 was one where there was hardly any relation to the figure unless you looked for it, and then you could see it. But then increasingly from that point on I left what you might call a general approach to figuration and began to get the figure in more and more explicitly. I often wonder myself why it's done. I don't know for sure, but I think it gives me something to grip. You know, I have something there. Now this picture here is 1963. The figure is very, very clearly given. So at some point after 1960 it was clearly resolved. I can't make up my mind now when I make my big paintings I have a certain kind of success with this kind of human figuration. I would like to make what I call my landscapes which would be completely abstract.

MR. SANDLER: But in a picture like this, the figure is found?

MR. MCNEIL: It's not only found; it's completely abstract. You see this is the whole thing: I'm not a figure painter at all. I'm an abstract painter where I hope that bringing in the figure brings in certain human or psychological connotations or associations, and I hope that deepens the meaning of the picture. I just hope it does, but it's a kind of lame-brained way of approaching it. But it's pathetic. I just hope it does; that's all. In other words, I think that when colors have reference to human experiences maybe they'll be more meaningful than if they are just colors, just abstract. I'm not clear on that. I just read something by Ortega and Gasset recently. It's surprising, you know, he wrote this in 1923, I guess. It's in *The Dehumanization of Man*. He said that a work of art should become as abstract as possible without losing all human references. I like to think that that's a strange insight, a very powerful insight. I mean as far as I'm concerned the idea of abstraction is not a warm one. The idea of expression is what interests me all the time; and feeling. See they all go together. And that's why I'm not very interested in Constructivist art. I would like to get as much feeling as possible into the work.

MR. SANDLER: In 1952, George, Harold Rosenberg published his essay "The American Action Painters." Did you have much sympathy to the ideas?

MR. MCNEIL: I loved the ideas of the redcoats and the coonskinners. Because it was wonderful in a strange way that much of the great American art was made not in protest against European culture, you might say, but it sort of happened. Like [Walt] Whitman and [Herman] Melville and [Albert?] Ryder, they're all much more American than they are, say, international or European. That I think was particularly Pollock's role also. In some strange way he was a coonskinner and, you know, with the worst people like Benton. And there's this absolutely weird transmutation which takes place and then he really creates world culture not following the tradition of European art. So I think that was a wonderful, wonderful insight that Harold had. Now it must be understood like everything else, it's not that simple. Pollock actually was pirating Picasso in these years. He was in Masson. He was in Surrealism. And there were the other influences that we could find if you just picked up a book of his work. So he's not a coonskinner literally. Then everybody else like de Kooning and Tworkov and Brooks, they were all men of the museums. There's just myself. It's silly to think you have to live in Europe to know the European culture. Sometimes you can know it better at a distance than the people who are right there. Nevertheless, there was a certain cultivation in Europe which they simply had never been able to lose, a certain refinement. If I made that statement in 1952 that it's the business of an artist to always-what did I say?-"destroy that which is and move toward that which isn't"-that's what I believe in so much. Those guys are sort of steeped in culture. You know, they can't get out of it. And they believe in things like refinement. And they believe in things like quality. So when Pollock sort of offset the way with what you might call non-art then the others like Hofmann and de Kooning and all of us found a tremendous nourishment there, tremendous strength and power there. We just took it.

MR. SANDLER: There were certain statements in the air, for example, in a panel you were on at The Club where

you said that-if I remember exactly the notes I read-you said that to the guys who were really always bugging you and you would consider truly great, were Cézanne and Mondrian. Yet at some point you felt that you had to turn to Van Gogh and make something of formlessness.

MR. MCNEIL: Of course. Yes. I said I would turn to Van Gogh at that time?

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: Cézanne is particularly the one who bugs me continually because his art seems to be impossible, it seems to be so magical, it seems to be so wonderful. But I'm convinced that if you hold on to that you'll just go down. I have no doubt at all that you pay our greatest respect to him by somehow trying to extend the sensation that he had, you know. He galvanized art to a marvelous extent. It's just that people who follow him have to do the same thing. And I think they did. But I think there was a great period of lassitude or inertia between, say, 1912 and 1914, and abstract expressionism, you know, like say, 1915 to 1945. I think there was a great deal of depending on what had been done and developing leads which had been done. Then you think of all these great talents like [Maurice de] Vlaminck and [Andre] Derain who turned away from their early work. That is extraordinary to me. A man like [Georges] Braque sort of subsides into a mannered painting.

MR. SANDLER: You're suggesting then that your sympathies would be more with the earlier Fauve work than the later-

MR. MCNEIL: Oh, yes. Even Matisse, you know, was a sort of slack artist in many paintings between maybe 1920 and 1937 or 1938. He starts making magnificent paintings just around 1940. Then he just keeps on, just making wonderful paintings.

MR. SANDLER: Well, that was one of the reasons I asked about Rosenberg because he seemed to have reflected some of those ideas: the unpremeditated image.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes.

MR. SANDLER: Finding it in the process, the rejection of received ideas, composition, color, form, all of that.

MR. MCNEIL: Does he say that in the article?

MR. SANDLER: On Action Painting.

MR. MCNEIL: The great thing I have against him is his seeming to put some value on action. I mean that to me is completely unimportant. The biggest damn fool in the world can make an action painting. So a painting has no value whatsoever because it's action. I mean it has value because in some ways it makes a form which to my mind is expressive. And it can be made in a studied way like Mondrian made it; and it can be made in a free way the way de Kooning made it; and then it can be made in an in-between way like Cézanne did. Right? It wasn't studied and it wasn't only energy. So like you used the word "tension", he's somewhere in tension between these two points of forming and at the same time sort of inspired intuitive work. So I now react against the concept of action painting and consider it to be one of the reasons why maybe abstract expressionism has created perhaps a certain distaste for many people, and that is that it got to be something like this thing of confessional painting, as though feeling is enough, and as though intention is enough. There was a lot of work which was just, you know, sort of careless and inconsequential, just thrown at the canvas, you might say.

MR. SANDLER: This is the point you made in that thing you wrote on spontaneity which I like. It was very important to me, that little article, because it was-

MR. MCNEIL: When did I write that? In 1958?

MR. SANDLER: 1958, yes. It was the first time that I really saw someone who was able to deal with the thing in formal terms where you talked about a mass image, a non-form form.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. Exactly. You're right. I think this is the thing that the artist always has to watch out for, that he teaches himself to make a form and he has to watch out that he doesn't get trapped in his own form, you know. Like then you become a practitioner of a certain kind. I'm not saying that a guy has to stand on his head all the time. But we were talking about Braque, I think Braque got trapped in his own painting, and then he painted Braques. And that's what people mean I guess when they say you imitate yourself.

MR. SANDLER: Make pictures of a style in a style.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes.

MR. SANDLER: Do you remember the Soutine Retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in 1950?

MR. MCNEIL: No, I don't. But I wish I did. Because I admired him very much, very much. You see this is a very strange thing that except for de Kooning in those years, say, 1950 to 1955, there's really no painter who has quite done what I sort of foresee being done, what I would like to see being done, which would be somewhat like what Nakian does in sculpture or even [Alberto] Giacometti did in sculpture, that same kind of intensity of painting. And as much as I admire Soutine, I think there were certain limitations, maybe subject matter limitations, scale-he never really got onto the intensity of a tremendous painting which people like Pollock and de Kooning were able to catch on. Like he is the germs of everything that I believe would be wonderful. But when compared to de Kooning's painting, and even the painting that de Kooning has just shown at Knoedler's [Knoedler & Company, New York, New York], it becomes a sort of a small contribution. You talk sometimes about a minor poet, and God knows Soutine is not a minor artist. He's not. You talk about someone like Boudin as a minor painter. Soutine is not. He's a giant. Still and all, the temper of the time I think what people are searching for, certainly what I'm searching for, is a more intense expression. So I have a great affinity and tenderness and sympathy for him. But it's as though he's more the 19th century with what they call cabinet paintings, you know, small paintings. I think there's such intensity now in painting, or there could be such intensity in painting-there isn't much intensity in painting-that Soutine can't satisfy this great energy impulse which I have.

MR. SANDLER: You sound as if you feel we are still fairly at the beginning of-?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, I don't think it's been done at all. I think de Kooning caught on wonderfully well in those years, but I don't think that his paintings that he just made now are up to those earlier paintings. I love them, I love these paintings, I adored them. And they stimulated me once again very much; but not quite right.

MR. SANDLER: What was the attitude to the earlier improvisations of Kandinsky?

MR. MCNEIL: They never fitted in. I don't remember anyone ever talking about them or anyone ever being influenced by them. I think that the people in the 30s saw the stuff at the Beroness Rebay-the Museum of Non-Objective Art. And we saw the geometric things mainly. So no one ever talked about that. And remember there was not feeling at that time for free abstraction.

MR. SANDLER: Yes. But what happens in the 40s?

MR. MCNEIL: No one talked about him either. No one.

MR. SANDLER: What is there about his work that, say, turns you off?

MR. MCNEIL: Well, he started to make these geometric things and he became just another Constructivist.

MR. SANDLER: Yes. But I mean the earlier ones?

MR. MCNEIL: I liked them very much. And they did influence me, I think. I got mixed up in modern art around 1929 or 1930, maybe the spring of 1929. And almost immediately I read that book of his, *The Art of Spiritual Harmony* and I was very much interested. You see there was no ground for grasping abstract art at this time. I think I told you about that in the last lecture conversation.

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: We didn't make any difference between Picasso, let's say, Picasso's Cubism and Kandinsky's free painting. It was just modern art. And the fact that Picasso might have had an attitude which was absolutely diametric to Kandinsky's no one ever thought about. It was considered to be modern art, that's all. So it was all put in one pot and you tried to figure out some kind of a basis for this new art. And I swear I didn't become conscious of the fact that there are many directions in modern art until-I don't know-maybe ten years ago.

MR. SANDLER: And that they're antithetical.

MR. MCNEIL: And they're antithetic, yes. If you're going in one direction you can't wear one shoe going in this direction, and the other shoe going in the other direction, or take a train going in two different directions. It's destructive to the artist. So he did influence me very much in these early years when I was trying to find my way toward abstract painting in the sense of leaving representational painting, and trying to get my basis in abstraction, trying to find some roots in it. So actually I got nowhere. Just before Hofmann came to America, say, in the summer of 1932, I was doing quite representational work simply because I had no confidence in what I was doing. I knew it was unnatural. I had analyzed what these men were doing, I had studied Picasso and Braque and all these, and I wound up in something which I knew wasn't real for me. So I did what everybody does. You go back to the figure and you draw in a sort of realistic way, and at least you have confidence that whatever you are doing is right for you in relation to that. But then I was very fortunate. I mean I would have wound up completely an American painter. But then Hofmann came and immediately I picked up making abstractions again.

MR. SANDLER: But where would Picasso fit in?

MR. MCNEIL: Always the leader. Always the overwhelming figure. Like Jehovah. And no that I think back he was a young man in those days. Like in 1930 he was only 49 years old.

MR. SANDLER: That's right. He's 81 now.

MR. MCNEIL: Imagine that. So he was a relatively young man in this time. And yet there was no question ever that he was not the sort of archetypal God, you might say, a terror figure as much as someone else. That's given out I think best by Gorky. Gorky was completely enthralled by him in the 30s.

MR. SANDLER: And Graham, too.

MR. MCNEIL: Graham also in the 30s. And younger artists. Once I got with Hofmann I began to find a more natural or normal way. But many of the artists who were not influenced by Hofmann, like George Byron Browne, were influenced by Picasso. Nothing wrong in that. Everyone was.

MR. SANDLER: Yes. He did study for a period with-

MR. MCNEIL: With Hofmann, but only for a very short time, and never really got into Hofmann, you might say.

MR. SANDLER: Pollock, of course, didn't study with Hofmann but they are-

MR. MCNEIL: They live in adjacent houses.

MR. SANDLER: Yes. You suggest, too, that your admiration of Matisse would have come somewhat-

MR. MCNEIL: I don't think I was clear about Matisse in these years. In other words, I was sort of lame-brained in the sense that since his work was not overtly abstract, I thought of him as a figurative painter, and I was interested in getting abstraction. That was what was exciting to me. So the fact that Matisse wasn't doing abstract art sort of-I didn't have enough sense to see beneath the sort of simple subject matter and get to what I see now-that he was always an abstract artist; always.

MR. SANDLER: George, at the opening of your last show, it happened twice, and I was sort of standing by you and I think one time with Hugo Weber and one time with someone else. I didn't say anything. And then you smiled because it was an opening after. But there was affinity spoken about between your work and the German Expressionists. And I just wondered, because it didn't strike me that way-

MR. MCNEIL: No, but Hugo mentioned [Emil] Nolde. And in some strange way if you had asked me before that minute, "Was there any affinity with German Expressionism?" I would have said, "No." I don't like German Expressionism. But it just does happen that some paintings of Nolde I think are very great. I think he has some great café scenes which I remember. And some are wild. And I love that. In some strange way [Jean] Dubuffet has some figural things where you get a certain kind of anguish. And of course you go back to de Kooning's Women. This I find enormously exciting. To take some kind of human situation and then see if you can symbolize it with the most expressive form possible, or else in dealing with form, you know, it isn't one or the other, it isn't form and content. But somehow if you can make your form express this human anguish or the human pathos it would seem to me to be enormously satisfying. I haven't done that yet. But I seem to be approaching it. So then when Hugo pointed it out I saw it in that figure. And then Hugo pointed out something else. I had a form like a shoe. And this is a little bit what I'm interested in without making a big deal about it, you know, like fetishism. Like [David] Hare has a certain fetishistic character, hews hands. And it just seems to me that if you're dealing with color and form, there's no reason to me why you can't try and charge something out of that primitive feeling into these things. So only with certain paintings of Nolde. But strangely I'm very interested in the work of [Ernst Ludwig] Kirchner, say, between 1905 and 1908; he has done some fine things. This is the whole period of Fauvism, you see.

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: And what I like about Kirchner at this time, and Nolde, is that they do charge the work with more intense directed feeling as opposed, let's say, to Matisse and the French generally who are really more classicists and away from this intensity of human feeling. So in that sense, you see, it's as though you named five things of German Expressionism and I would say I adore them, but everything else, like Beckmann's work, I just abominate. I can't stand it at all because it's the emotion which doesn't consummate in form. You know it's like a screaming actress, and it's very disgusting to me, you know, like the Yiddish theatre.

MR. SANDLER: Yes. Lebensville.

MR. MCNEIL: Where you go out of your mind in five minutes.

MR. SANDLER: I remember that as a kid. One of the things that's come up several times in these tapes, it comes up very quickly, but I've noticed it from a lot of talks with you and other artists is, you know, you keep saying, "But I haven't done it yet." And implicit there is-oh, we've run out-

[ENDOF TAPE 2, SIDE 1; BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE 2]

MR. SANDLER: You know, this idea that I was suggesting where you keep saying, "I haven't done it," and there seems to be implicit there an idea that it can't be done, that it ultimately must end in failure. Now this came up a great deal at the early Club: that somehow for all you want to put in art you're never going to be able to get it all in.

MR. MCNEIL: All right. But this is what galvanizes you and excites you to keep working. It's a basic part of the whole creative process, this irritability with sensing what you would like to do and feeling that you haven't done it but that you're going to do it. That keeps you going and going and going and going. There's this wonderful scene-to come back to Cézanne-who again is a kind of archetypal, Messianic terror figure-where he had that first attack of illness and he was out painting and a rainstorm came up and I think he had gone into a coma or something like that. He was brought home to his house in a cart. Then I think he was in bed recuperating from that. And he writes a letter to his paint dealer. And it's a very testy letter, a very irritable letter. He says like, "Sir, I sent you this order two weeks ago and why haven't you filled it?" Then he lists the colors that he wants. And the quantities are significant: 12 of this, 12 of that. So he had no intention of kicking in. He had no intention of doing anything but get better and go on with these things that he was doing.

MR. SANDLER: But this sort of attitude would also be a source of great anguish?

MR. MCNEIL: It is. And that's what so ghastly about these young painters who are so smug and who send their work out to be made, you see. When you get to be my age-I was just 60-you don't want to become a mean old man. There are so many aggravations provoking you, you might say. But the smugness which characterizes so many of the younger painters is so provoking, you know, it's perfectly all right for them. I just saw something where there's some kind of an art and science exhibit at the Albright museum [Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo, New York].

MR. SANDLER: That's right.

MR. MCNEIL: Someone was asked about the relation of physics and art and he said, "Is there a difference between the two?" Well, when someone has the sense of invention to put things together, where's the anguish? Where's the torment? On the other hand, I don't believe that a lot of old guys like myself should go around crying in our beards about anguish and despair. That's boring. That's horribly boring. It just does seem to be a part of the whole creative drive to somehow have this gap between anything that you're doing and when you sort of irritably expect you're going to do. I think in a sense in the end you do it, you know. You do it like two years later. But by that time you're disgusted or you're not satisfied with that that's two years later. So this is the whole process of one's life. When I hear some of the young painters talking about product all the time, I'm just sort of maddened by it and have to watch out that I don't become some kind of irritable old guy.

MR. SANDLER: One more thing, because I would like to look at the slides with you. You know, in some of the discussion today, the whole idea of an antipathy to the School of Paris after the war, could you mention a little more about that?

MR. MCNEIL: Well, there was nothing there. There are a lot of artist like [Alfred] Manessier, and who else?

MR. SANDLER: [Georges] Mathieu and [Pierre] Soulages.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. They all exemplified the defects of the School of Paris which seemed to me to be always somehow linked to a picture on some wall in a salon, you know, like in a fine home. Elegance. In other words, the elegance is in their work. And I'm glad you mentioned Soulages. All you have to do is contrast Kline and Soulages and you see the vitality of the Kline and the sort of elegance in the Soulages. I think a lack of truth in the Soulages as compared to Kline. Now I think it's even a defect to a certain extent in Matisse and [Pierre] Bonnard. In some strange way they are hooked in that tradition of fineness. And it's completely unacceptable in terms of art I mean the artists has to exist to find himself always. This thing of the precious product of fine art which is the heritage since the Renaissance and its plush art galleries and all this crap, it's just devastating to the artists. So you had a bunch of people in America who were somehow disinherited and sort of dis-alliated to the art world, they were rejects of the art world, you might say, like Pollock, like de Kooning, like Kline. And because of that they were free in a certain way. They could bring a certain toughness to the work-now I don't believe the work should be professionally tough. That's equally boring. But I think it should have a certain reality which was French painting, and to me convincingly and overwhelmingly not in the French painting. Refinement is at the core of it. Of course that's true in a lot of American abstract art. I'm talking about a lot of this made in America abstract art, a lot of made in America expressionism where the guy never get's beyond the surface of

the canvas. In a lot of this hard-edge work now they never get beyond the surface of the canvas. They enhance the surface all the time. So that's why Dubuffet I think was quite good. I except him of course when I talk about the French painters. And he lost his nerve, too.

MR. SANDLER: Yes. He got very decorative.

MR. MCNEIL: Horrible.

MR. SANDLER: Either decorative or just humorous.

MR. MCNEIL: I don't know-like cartoons, you might say.

MR. SANDLER: One thing more: in the article on spontaneity in *It Is*, the idea of a non-form form or a mass image, you go back to Analytic Cubism. I forget now whether you also go back to late Impressionism. Well, what was the attitude, because this has now become a point for contemporary historians, how is Impressionism considered in the late 40s and early 50s? Is it considered at all?

MR. MCNEIL: Not at all. Not at all.

MR. SANDLER: Does it enter into any talking about Pollock or anything?

MR. MCNEIL: Never! Never. I think the art historians have to be careful because written history is much more real than the actual history. Well, I see this pretty clearly. I see a lot of painters who did not have much power. In other words, they always would have been a kind of lyrical artist under any circumstances. They didn't have a certain intensity of expression. And that's not to be held against them. I mean why hold it against Monet that he wasn't Van Gogh? Monet simply was always more lyrical and more decorative. So these artists were up in a wave of abstract expressionism and they simply adapted the big direction of free expressionism or free abstractionism to their own particular interest and their work then tended to be more lyrical in character. I think it tended to also be a little bit soft in character and probably will not have as much possibility of lasting as did the more intense work of Kline and Pollock and de Kooning and Hofmann.

MR. SANDLER: Did Hofmann have much to say about Impressionism?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, I think so. But not much. I don't remember him ever talking about it but then I just have had great periods drop out that I don't remember at all. He even talked about Analytic Cubism. It's just that I think his background was always in Analytic Cubism.

MR. SANDLER: Yes. And his methods.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. The thing about Hofmann, as I'm sure I said on the last tape, is that he probably changed his teaching radically when he came here to America. I have a feeling that this teaching at the Art Students League in 1932 was radically different from what he did in 1935.

MR. SANDLER: And probably in the 40s, too.

MR. MCNEIL: Then as he started to work himself more and more he went away from that Analytic Cubism. He never left it really, he never really left the plane. But I think he began to see the importance of total painting. Analytic Cubism is based on drawing.

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: It's that Constructivist thing I talked about before so that there's a fight there between the drawing and the painting. The one inhibits the other. I mean the drawing inhibits the painting.

MR. SANDLER: Yes. Say, George, can we look at some of the slides?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. Here I have five paintings which were at some exhibition at the Wise Gallery -or no-yes, I guess it was-where they had something with the theme "Twenty-Five Years of Painting," something like that.

MR. SANDLER: Yes, I remember that show.

MR. MCNEIL: So I have a painting from 1937 until about 1962 and here I think you can see a good cross-section of my development in this period. Now in a very interesting way-I'll show you that slide, the blue one up there on the upper left-I have that. And that's about 1937 or 1938. That's about the same period as that one that was just reproduced in that book-what is it-*American Art*[*American Art* Since 1900, Frederick A. Praeger: 1967]?

MR. SANDLER: Oh, the Barbara Rose book?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. The Barbara Rose book. There's another one which is a sequel to this which was shown; so it's about 1937 or 1938, I'm not quite sure. But this is a very free abstract painting and is the kind of painting that got me into a certain kind of trouble with the American Abstract Artists.

MR. SANDLER: Could you go into that? What was the nature of the trouble?

MR. MCNEIL: Well, the work was almost all geometric in character, and my forms were just free-moving. Many of the students from the Hofmann school like Bowden were doing the same thing and I guess that was one of the reasons why he ultimately left. I think the same would have been true for Lee Krasner.

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: Her things were free also.

MR. SANDLER: There were other people like-was her name Lyall?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. Agnes Lyall. She was also a Hofmann student. That would be the same thing. And then there's this painter Ralph Rosenborg who always worked freely in this period. It was sort of always tolerated, you know, unhappily tolerated. But it's interesting in any case, that the free-flowing form is there. Now when you come down to the one underneath it, that's about 1940 or 1941. It's the last painting I did before stopping painting to go into a war job. And this is an interesting turn because I was moving myself toward hard edge painting, as you can see here. Now in the period, say, from 1936 to 1939 or 1940, almost all through this period I was engaged on a big mural for the WPA and I was always working with that kind of a free form which is above it, you see, free-flowing forms, really process painting with the painting developing all the time. That one above is a process painting where I didn't have any idea at all before I started the thing.

MR. SANDLER: Was that mural completed?

MR. MCNEIL: It was never completed and it disappeared during the war. When I came back it was gone. That was because they had stored it out in the hall. So I couldn't say anything about that. All right. Now the painting that's below was done from nature and represents a kind of geometricizing of nature. The forms are free but they're hard-edge in character. I was really working in two directions. I have another painting which I made on the very same subject, as I recall, where the forms are more free-flowing but they're not so linear as they are over here. Now this comes from certain concepts that I had, you know, certain form-making concepts. There's especially this thing of organic unity that the painting should be a kind of perfect form. Now I suppose that this painting could have been appreciated more by the American Abstract Artists. I'm not quite clear about that.

MR. SANDLER: But there's a strong emphasis on organic forms there.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, there is. I suppose there is in any case. It even could be likened maybe to some things of Miró except that the forms are very necessary forms. In other words, they were made from nature in response to movements in nature and they then have a certain kind of set character. All right. Now that painting in the center is one which I showed I think at the Carnegie International [Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburg, PA] in 1953. The painting was made in 1951 and that would have been in my first show.

MR. SANDLER: At Egan's?

MR. MCNEIL: Did I have my first show in 1950 or 1951, do you remember?

MR. SANDLER: No, but I can check that out.

MR. MCNEIL: All right. Well, I'm quite sure that that painting was in my first exhibition and was surely one of the best paintings that I had in the show. So you can see what I meant before when I say I was moving toward free form but it was still structured in character.

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: In other words, this is worlds apart from what Pollock was doing, and what de Kooning was doing, and Kline was doing. It's still a sort of controlled expression, you might say. Now the next painting I consider one of my very best paintings. That's the *Black Sun*. And that was done somehow around 1953 where you see I'm moving away from what you might call form-consciousness.

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: And this is overall painting. And that one there which is called something like *Abstraction 1951-I* can't remember-can you see that the drawing is very positive in this? Not that I drew something, not that I made it from a drawing. But the kind of delimiting of form, or limiting or form, which is a drawing act, you might say,

and which characterizes Cubism all the time; that's in that painting. It's not in the next painting.

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: And a funny thing is it's not in that first painting either, the one I did in 1937; it's not in that. It maybe a little bit more in that. But in any case if you go to the last painting which I made around 1962 I guess, that then shows ten years of moving away from these strongly demarcated forms in that second and third one. Now I still have this dilemma which is always like a recurrent theme because it comes out in some of my work now where there's a single image against an all-colored background, something like that but even more hard-edge. I have a painting in the "Whitney Annual" of 1964 [Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY], I think, with a green background.

MR. SANDLER: Yes, I remember that.

MR. MCNEIL: And I didn't want to make it like that. And when you come to my studio you'll see some very-I don't want to make them like that-but when I keep working on them for months and months and months, I eliminate and I eliminate and I eliminate and I eliminate, and then I get almost a figure in ground approach which I would like to leave behind me. It's a torture. I prefer this overall painting.

MR. SANDLER: Like the last one?

MR. MCNEIL: Like that last one, yes. In other words, I prefer the first painting and the fourth and the fifth one. And this other one is a kind of torment from my form background. This happens simply as a matter of working on something for months and even years. So these paintings there, the fourth one, of about 1952 or 1953, and then the fifth one of about 1962, these represent a more total painterly spontaneous approach which corresponds to an all or nothing, like whatever I got there I got there at once, which is the opposite of the second and third one.

MR. SANDLER: But yet I think that one should mention that by "at once" you mean just the last time you were painting because this could go on for months.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, the last register. Right. It goes on and you make 60 images or you make 80 images. And this has been a great, great trouble with me just as far as keeping the life of the canvas is concerned. I was very interested in reading in that little brochure that Hess put out at the same time that-you know, he put it out at the time of de Kooning's exhibition.

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: And he pointed out that de Kooning uses paint remover. And I do, too. I'm very careful to isolate the paint remover. I get it all off and then I cover it with glue and I cover that with another surface. Well I'm constantly peeling off painting. My floor is always littered with scrapings from paintings. I sharpen a palette knife until it has a razor-edge character and then I bend it to even make it even more intense and I go right down to the canvas month in and month out. You see this. It's grim. All right. Now this is about 1935 as I remember. It represents Hofmann and then it also represents what I was trying to figure out before, a kind of analysis of what I thought abstraction should be. I suppose there's Picasso in it. I suppose there's Braque in it. I suppose there's Gris in it. But nevertheless it's a very serious, sober painting. And after anyone has made a painting like that the form consciousness is in their bones, you might say.

MR. SANDLER: There's that central image there.

MR. MCNEIL: Even there there's a central image of a certain kind. But you can see how this painting is locked together.

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: And once again how this organic unity thing is there. It's a kind of demonstration of space painting in the whole thing. A small painting, maybe 16 by 20 or 20 by 24.

MR. SANDLER: Does it have a title, do you remember?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, it does have a title. It's called *Still Life*. It's 20 by 16. So it would be *Still Life* 1935. All right. Now I have another one of the same period which is practically the same that's called *Still Life* also. It's almost exactly the same approach.

MR. SANDLER: It's hard to see the surface.

MR. MCNEIL: The surface is rich.

MR. SANDLER: It would be very rich. It wouldn't be that mat surface that the-

MR. MCNEIL: That the other people, the geometric painters used? No. It is a rich surface because I was working on it and taking off painting and working on it and so forth and so forth. Both of these little paintings are 16 by 24 and they both were made over maybe weeks and weeks of tortured painting. The lower right-hand corner here is not at all satisfactory. I was twenty-seven years old though when this was made so it isn't exactly a beginner's painting. But you can see how deeply I was in the structured approach to abstract.

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: Something that Pollock never was in so deeply. And de Kooning I don't think ever was as deeply in that either. Now I have some other paintings of 1935 which are interesting but nevertheless I don't have slides of them. I'm sorry I don't because some of them are actually better. All right. Now this painting looks as though it's upside down and I think it goes the other way. There it is. It's a figure. Now you can probably see the figuration. You have something like a head there in the center.

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: Again a central image.

MR. SANDLER: What is that from?

MR. MCNEIL: 1937. It's a small painting like, oh, 20 by 27; or 22-

MR. SANDLER: But you've almost completely lost the plane there.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, it's moving toward a certain amount of freedom in this painting. At the Poindexter Gallery [New York, NY] they had a show of the 30s-

MR. SANDLER: Yes, I remember that.

MR. MCNEIL: In 1957 maybe, huh? I was away.

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, that's right. Now they used a painting there which I don't think I have a slide of. And that's in the same period. A kind of ordered approach to form but more curvilinear and less straight line planes. Now again a painting like this is tortured, you know, worked on, worked on, and worked on. The funny thing is it's a small painting. And that's what young artists can't understand that in the 30s a painting which was, say, 32 by 40 was a big painting as far as we were concerned.

MR. SANDLER: In a curious way in the very late 1940s and very early 1950s you almost pick up from this painting of 1937, this kind of painting.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, I'm sure it goes back and forth all the time like we say the child is father to the man and you sort of can't help but repeat yourself later on because you have these germs there. It's bad and good. Exactly the same time, exactly the same kind of painting, small painting. What's interesting though about these two paintings I think is that they're big in the concept. In other words, if you didn't see the easel there and I said to you what size that they were I think you'd say they were bigger in size. You would have said maybe 40 by 48.

MR. SANDLER: No, I would have gone up to 60.

MR. MCNEIL: See, they're big on concept. Now remember all the time that I made these small paintings I was working on that big mural where I was using great brushes and treating it exactly like an easel painting. Maybe the painting was 20 feet long.

MR. SANDLER: One thing that I would like to ask again although you've answered it: paintings like this and the one you just showed, the freer form, they would not have been very sympathetically received by the A.A.A.?

MR. MCNEIL: No. A painting like this wouldn't have been received as much as anything else because of its tortured character. I mean they always had a certain amount of sharp finish like you see with hard-edge painting today. They finished every single edge in a very immaculate way. So a painting like this which is a searching painting-I'm searching it all the time-this they would not have responded to at all. They would have I think considered it a dumb painting. This is the painting that you saw before which I said was in the show. I have it here, and it's upside down here. But I don't know really which is upside down and which isn't. So it doesn't make any difference.

MR. SANDLER: It's really quite loose for the period.

MR. MCNEIL: Oh, yes. Now this is made in tempera. And that's sort of unfortunately in tempera because I think it will have to be put under glass.

MR. SANDLER: If shown. Although tempera is a pretty tough medium.

MR. MCNEIL: No, this has started to flake a little bit.

MR. SANDLER: Oh, it has?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. Tempera I think is okay if you use it directly. But here I was working improvisationally, you know, painting color over color so it didn't stand up.

MR. SANDLER: Of course, you know de Kooning's backdrop for that [inaudible] 1945 or so, that was in tempera. And that's held up very well.

MR. MCNEIL: That's interesting.

MR. SANDLER: But I think it was just sort of once, not too much revision.

MR. MCNEIL: All right. Now I don't have a companion painting to this. I have a red painting which I like very much. This painting I guess is the one that's in Barbara Rose's book.

MR. SANDLER: I think so.

MR. MCNEIL: Now I worked on a still-life in 1939 and 1940 maybe even where I worked on it and worked on it and worked on it for months and months and made many variations. This is related a little bit to that painting which was so edged, you know that one that was in the five paintings?

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: Where you just keep working on it and keep eliminating the form and eliminating the form. But there were many things about this painting which I liked and I could maybe have developed something out of it. The painting I think has character. I think the colors are a little grim.

MR. SANDLER: But there's a kind of marvelous inventiveness about the organic form.

MR. MCNEIL: You see that curved movement that goes through there?

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: Well, all I had to do is take the blue background and put it into one of those forms and it gets just like the other painting, the painting that you saw before.

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: So I'm not quite sure-let me put this in. I know it's not going to come out because it's too dark. I'm not sure if this is the same painting or another painting. Oh, it's the same painting and it comes out better. In other words, this is actually more like what the color is. That's a small painting too, maybe 20 by 24.

MR. SANDLER: But almost from the first you sort of have-

MR. MCNEIL: Scale.

MR. SANDLER: -shied away from any kind of over-refined finished surface.

MR. MCNEIL: Pretty much. I think some of those hard-edged ones are pretty finished.

MR. SANDLER: But not when you consider, say, someone like-

MR. MCNEIL: Morris or Reinhardt. No. You can see the painting underneath. Yes, that's true. You can see the effort underneath all the time. And that's always been something which has aggravated my wife a good deal, that you can see the efforts underneath. There's just no way of getting around it. All right. Now this is an important painting. You see I didn't make many paintings. I would work on a painting for a very long time, six weeks, eight weeks, so that in a year I wouldn't have many paintings. Of course most of these paintings have been destroyed. Now this is a painting which I know is 40 by 48 inches.

MR. SANDLER: About what date is that?

MR. MCNEIL: This is 1940. It's the same subject that was shown just now, and it's the same subject that was in that hard-edge painting with the five put together where once again if you just keep working on the forms, working on the forms, you sort of get down to nothing, you might say.

MR. SANDLER: But there is in this and in the last work a sense of a kind of invention on the figures.

MR. MCNEIL: Not in these. These are all still-lives. Can you see a figure in those?

MR. SANDLER: No, I was just thinking of the form on the right of the canvas. But there would be a sense of natural form?

MR. MCNEIL: There would be a sense that it came from something, I think. Yes. In other words, if you look at this and you look at the other hard-edge painting-this is somewhat hard-edge-if you look at the other hard-edge painting of the 1930s this would be clearly different in character. I think this was shown in one of the last exhibitions of the American Abstract Artists before the war like 1941. That's the last I have then for-that's 1940 or 1941. I'll tell you in a minute-1940. I have that painting in the warehouse. Now then I told you I made some things at some point between 1943 and 1946.

MR. SANDLER: That's right. When you were in Washington.

MR. MCNEIL: Actually I made these in New York. I was first stationed in New York. Maybe I made them after 1946. I'm just not clear about it. The reason I'm a little bit hesitant is that maybe I already knew about Pollock's work. I'm just not sure. I was stationed in New York, and I was living at home, so I distinctly remember this very table and coming home at night and working with cut paper. So these were made sometime between 1943 and 1946. Now this is a gouache. I have these in storage. I sent these on an exhibition after 1946 to Black Mountain [Black Mountain College, Asheville, NC]. Ilya Bolotowsky was working there at that time. So this is a combination then of collage and painting.

MR. SANDLER: But it's completely free form.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. Now the reason it's a free form is that it's improvisational. I was not working from nature. Always when I worked from nature they tended to get structured, tight. You can't avoid it. Now I'll just show these one after the other. They're all small, they're all free painting, and as much as anything else I'm interested in seeing them myself. Now I hope the background comes out. But it wouldn't make any difference where I would have them made, you see.

MR. SANDLER: Yes. These could well have been made before Pollock's work.

MR. MCNEIL: Because they're a little bit in the direction of that other free one that's in Barbara Rose's book. But you see it has certain things in there which are cut out from *Life* magazine. There's something of a montage there in the lower left-hand corner, where I just pasted a photograph on to this thing. I have a feeling that this was done after I saw something of his.

MR. SANDLER: Well, would Hofmann by this time already have begun to work on-?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. I would have seen Hofmann's painting from time to time in these years. But not really very much.

MR. SANDLER: No?

MR. MCNEIL: No. Oh, he was having exhibitions by this time, wasn't he?

MR. SANDLER: He starts in 1944 I think.

MR. MCNEIL: Now when he had that exhibition I was stationed in New York. I remember seeing that exhibition in 1944.

MR. SANDLER: But that would have been tighter? No, no, no, he was working in a lot of different ways.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes.

MR. SANDLER: Actually the work is your own here, George.

MR. MCNEIL: You can see that?

MR. SANDLER: Yes, I mean this other thing-

MR. MCNEIL: These are small, I think they're 11 by 14, although I'm not sure. They could be 12 by 16 or something like that. They could even be 16 by 20. But they're small paintings, small collages almost everything. Now I would paint on pieces of paper and montage them also. So what you see here is actual painting, it's cut paper, and it's part of other paintings.

MR. SANDLER: This-the way this works in here is-

MR. MCNEIL: Well, if I ever have a retrospective I'll show some of these for sure. I think I showed you that one.

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: They always look better naturally than in this projection. You get more intense color. I have an idea that these are a little bit over-exposed. All right. I must have 20 or 30 of these. They're all the same. I could make them all in one night, you might say. I mean I could make one a night.

MR. SANDLER: And those are safe?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, they're all in storage as far as I know. Now we come to 1946-1948 and I pick up practically where I left off. These slides are not so hot. This was a bad period I think for me. A depressing period. I have an idea I made this out in Wyoming. I'm quite sure I made this in Wyoming. It's a fairly large painting, like 40 by 48 inches. And it's very much like that one I made before I went away in to the service. But the only thing is I was also working out of doors in gouache at the same thing. And it's really too bad that I don't have slides. I don't know why I don't have them. They're mountain forms in free forms and in many ways they're richer than this highly structured work that you see.

MR. SANDLER: It's almost as if you pick up again from that lower one.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. Right.

MR. SANDLER: But far more organic.

MR. MCNEIL: Now I remember doing this one I think in the summer of 1947 when we came back to New York. I seem to remember Herbert Matte coming over one night looking for money for my wife-when he was going out to Springs he wanted to take some money or something like that. I sort of remember that.

MR. SANDLER: Does that have a title? Do you remember?

MR. MCNEIL: No, I don't have any title on it. I don't even know if it exists. I have a feeling it doesn't exist. Because then later on when I started to make more free paintings I would have gotten sort of furious with these things.

MR. SANDLER: You would destroy earlier work?

MR. MCNEIL: Right. I couldn't stand it. Now this is organic of course but it gets close to some of the work of the 30s which you might call straight abstract painting.

MR. SANDLER: But again far more organic?

MR. MCNEIL: You can see that?

MR. SANDLER: Yes. And the color, too, would be far more psychological in a way.

MR. MCNEIL: You say this one, didn't you?

MR. SANDLER: No.

MR. MCNEIL: No, I guess not. These are all stages of the same painting, by the way. This is a small painting. I think I have this; I'm not sure. This is like the other small ones. I think this is cut paper. But maybe a little bit larger. I'm not sure if I have any more. Oh, yes, I did some figures. This is not a good painting. I don't know if I have it or not.

MR. SANDLER: This is the period where you're working in an abstract vein.

MR. MCNEIL: Same period. Out in Wyoming. Yes, exactly the same thing. The same period 1946 to 1948 I was working with figures like this. I don't know-there's no reason for apologizing for it.

MR. SANDLER: No, it's a terrific picture.

MR. MCNEIL: But when I think back on it though I get a little angry, you know. I could have been doing better things. I did some mountain paintings out there in Wyoming.

MR. SANDLER: Didn't the layoff during the war sort of get our hand out of it?

MR. MCNEIL: Maybe. This is Wyoming also. It's better I think, more open. But you can see I have always been... You can see then that it's quite different from the abstract expressionism of Pollock, that he was doing at the height.

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: But that I like. It's very linear. And you notice the space is very limited but there's a certain kind of excitement here. That's a good one I think. I'm quite sure I have it. Now I have to make a correction. That painting that I showed you from the Wise Gallery when we had *Twenty-Five Years-1947*, that is-it was not done before the war; it's really 1947. It's this one over here.

MR. SANDLER: Does that have a title.

MR. MCNEIL: Well, yes, it's called *Taut Figures*.

MR. SANDLER: Oh, good.

MR. MCNEIL: Now this I think is the summer of 1948 just before I came back to New York-either the spring or summer of 1948. So you might say that from 1946 to 1948 I was working with these relatively linear forms that you see here. I don't know if you can see it in the painting but the underpainting is coming out all over the painting.

MR. SANDLER: Yes, you can see it.

MR. MCNEIL: So these are made from nature in a quite interesting way. Now back in New York. This is the summer of 1949. And it's on the basis of the paintings that you see here that Egan gave me a show. So I showed this painting. I don't know what size it is; I'll tell you in a moment.

MR. SANDLER: Now does the surface here get to be sort of more painterly, or more vehemently painted?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. Yes.

MR. SANDLER: And that would be around 1949?

MR. MCNEIL: 1949, yes. I'm interested in the size of this-it's 24 by 30. And this next one is in the same vein as the other ones. This other one-this is like the ones that you've been seeing.

MR. SANDLER: Would these have been in the Egan show?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, they almost surely were in the Egan show. I know that these were in the Egan show. It's surprising to me to see them. The color in this is quite good. See this is a combination, isn't it, of the other?

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: But the straight lines are more structural in character.

MR. SANDLER: And the color is higher.

MR. MCNEIL: And the color is higher. Now if you had asked me what I had shown there I would have said three paintings because I don't remember these at all.

MR. SANDLER: When was your next show?

MR. MCNEIL: 1951 or 1952, I don't remember. Now I come to 1950 and I think there's a quite different change in the painting-although the first one doesn't seem so changed. Oh, this might have been a stage of one of the other paintings, or it might be the painting that was in the Museum of Modern Art show that I talked about, 1951. In fact I think it was. And then look, this next one now there's a really big change, 1950.

MR. SANDLER: Ah, yes.

MR. MCNEIL: Isn't that interesting. It's a small painting, I think. But here there's a marked change.

MR. SANDLER: Yes, there is.

MR. MCNEIL: That one was shown in the Whitney Museum, I think. It's 28 by 35.

MR. SANDLER: This one or the one before.

MR. MCNEIL: This one that I just showed you, which was a free central form-this one.

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: When do you want to stop?

MR. SANDLER: Oh, whenever you get tired.

MR. MCNEIL: I'm not tired.

MR. SANDLER: Good. Just run through 1951, possibly 1952, George, quickly.

MR. MCNEIL: I don't have to show you all of them?

MR. SANDLER: No. We might do a little of this next time.

MR. MCNEIL: Now this is 1951. I don't remember that painting. I know it's mine for sure but I was making a distinct change from that structured, hard, decisive painting. What I'll do, I'll just take some of these.

MR. SANDLER: I would like to get, say, through 1952 today.

MR. MCNEIL: The next ones are interesting because, you see, I was working backwards and forwards all the time.

MR. SANDLER: Yes. But it's more of a field idea.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. That's a good point, yes. Now maybe I was working away from subject matter-I'm not sure. So it's a little bit of that continuous movement of forms which I had been involved with since 1948 and before the war, and at the same time there is an element of freedom. This next one is the same. So my work was always quite structured in the period compared to what Kline was doing. It was always a more ordered type of painting. This is 1951; a decisive change.

MR. SANDLER: Yes. Actually the change would really take place in 1950.

MR. MCNEIL: I don't know. I can't see this anywhere in the house. Maybe I took it to the studio. I'll have to check. It's one of my best paintings. This is 1952. Now this one you might remember. This was in the exhibition at the Stable Gallery [New York, NY].

MR. SANDLER: Yes. And there's a kind of increasing vehemence.

MR. MCNEIL: Right. In 1952. You know one thing that I see in these paintings which might be one reason why I didn't have any kind of gallery success is that these paintings never looked quite finished. You know they always look a little bit on the rough side in some strange way. I don't know how to say it-but all of these, they don't look-

MR. SANDLER: They're uningratiating.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, they're uningratiating. This is a good one. And when we were talking about the French painting before I guess that's what I was trying to say, that the French painting is ingratiating.

MR. SANDLER: There's a sense in something like that, too, of the figure.

MR. MCNEIL: Now from this point on it's always the central image; there's always a big image in the painting. But you see I must have been working from still-lives because I keep going back to something like this which is structured in character, much richer than before but nevertheless structured. And there's a certain kind of setness of, a certain kind of placement there, you might say.

MR. SANDLER: This is the end of conversation with George McNeil, Tape 2.

[END OF TAPE 2, SIDE 2; BEGIN TAPE 3, SIDE 1]

MR. SANDLER: This is the third interview with George McNeil at his home on May 21, 1968. We're talking now about the *Cahiers d'Art* in the 1930s.

MR. MCNEIL: They used to say in those days that Picasso had an interest in the magazine.

MR. SANDLER: Well, he was featured in, gosh, whole issues. You couldn't read an issue without running into the name. But I didn't realize that Masson, you know, had gotten-to me that's interesting because it would imply that there was-did he interest Americans here at all?

MR. MCNEIL: No. No. I thought you were going to say that this would indicate that there was some interest in his contribution to abstract expressionism.

MR. SANDLER: No.

MR. MCNEIL: And of course, he did influence Pollock. But that was a very unique situation. I don't think he had any other influence.

MR. SANDLER: Artists here in the 30s. Yes. But I was just so interested in the play that was given to him. George, I just wanted to talk about some of your ideas. And to my knowledge-I may be wrong-and I guess you're in an interesting position here because you can, if you want, have an art historical bent and also think as an artist, but you were the first one to talk about the mass image, the single image that you say characterized the work of Pollock and, to a lesser degree, of [Mark] Tobey. Or I guess you can consider Tobey a lesser artist.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes.

MR. SANDLER: But he also had that kind of image. And I wondered if you could just talk a little bit more about that.

MR. MCNEIL: Well, Suzanne Langer wrote this book *Philosophy in a New Key* [*Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art*, Harvard University Press: 1941] which was published sometime after 1946 and which I knew maybe around 1947 or 1948. In this she spoke about the work of art as a total symbol. This made a great impression on me because I had been groping toward the same idea myself where, let's say, if you were interested in space you would develop a non-representational work, an abstract work where the picture as whole surely had meaning and yet it didn't have any of the usual meanings either in terms of representation or in terms of symbolism. So it seems to me that there was a kind of implicit meaning, implicit significance in the total painting, which was inchoate. In other words, you couldn't say, "This is the meaning of the symbol." It takes on a massive psychological character where everything is implied rather than stated. I think if you take Pollock's work, he goes from what you might call discreet symbols like the *She-Wolf* where you can handle a symbol in the middle of the picture and speak about this animal character which is there and which maybe Pollock even put into the painting. But then when you come to the later all-over paintings there's no singular symbolism. It's only a total symbolism. But when I speak about the concept of mass symbol, I think I meant it more in terms of Kline. I think he was the one who did it best. I think Tobey and Pollock were dealing with a general energy symbol, you might say, that is, Pollock in the late work, the all-over painting. But when you come to Kline though there's a massive psychological image which is very, very clearly-I can't say clearly stated-it's marked, the image is marked. And this is what I would have mostly to think of in terms of imagery. I've often thought about this in relation to the impact of these images like why are they communicative? Why do they have their power? As opposed to the other symbols which are very weak, and the discreet symbols which are relatively like what [Ben] Shahn does, you know. Which are weak in character. And I've never come to any conclusion. But the impactful nature of this non-discursive symbol, to use Langer's term, is very, very strong. I think I'm trying to say two things. I'm trying to say that Langer gave the concept of the total work of art as a symbol, which I think is extremely important. Then with someone like Kline where I use the term "mass symbol" it's the somewhat cursive power of the form to give a psychological non-direct symbolism, or non-discursive symbolism. So there's two things there where the Kline is really a subdivision of the first. Kline's whole picture is symbol. And then within that he did mark of a very, very strong powerful symbol.

MR. SANDLER: But you also talked about a mass image differentiating that from a picture that had clearly defined forms within it.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes.

MR. SANDLER: In a sense I didn't think of Kline.

MR. MCNEIL: Well, Cubism has clearly-defined forms within it. And in that sense someone like Picasso or Léger is not too different from the Renaissance ordering of form. They used planes. In the Renaissance they used figures and other natural objects. So there wasn't too much of a difference. There was a movement toward symbolic communication. And Kandinsky had made a strong movement toward non-representational communication. But it seemed to me that it wasn't until you come to abstract expressionism that the total evocation power of the painting began to find its place. You might say Marin did a little bit even. Monet a little also, but in Monet you always saw things, right?

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: You always saw reference.

MR. SANDLER: Yes. I think you once said that one of the problems that you felt some of the artists called the abstract expressionists have faced was how to structure a non-form or non-shape form.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. I think one of the great weaknesses of abstract expressionism was that it tended to fall into design. In other words, it tended to fall into a flaccid kind of statement. And you have this contradiction all the time, say, between form and non-form where the artists get sick of what he knows to be form and then he seeks non-form, which when he makes it becomes form. So I think in some strange way there is the concept of, well you see I wrote that article about ten years ago, or twelve years ago. And now my thoughts are a little bit clearer on the matter. Now I think that the important thing is the expressive intent. In other words, you are literally trying to make an expressive image or an expressive symbol without being self-conscious; it's always latently there. And then the point is, how do you get it? And in some strange way you have to structure it but you don't want to make a work where the structure will be primary, obvious. And so therefore, you are concerned with expression all the time and you hope that you won't think that expression is the consequence of structure but rather that somehow in making the structure you will be-in other words, you will have to structure the expression that you're trying to do without being conscious about structure as we were, say, in the 30s when we were so involved in Cubism and we were so involved in form-making. That's the big difference I think between the 30s and the period after World War II: that in the 30s we were consciously form-making and in the abstract expressionist period we were more concerned with expression and non-form, which, as I said, in a sense always is form in one way or the other.

MR. SANDLER: Yes. And you also spoke about that as a kind of dialectic where you were involved with spontaneity, with expressiveness. Yet, on the other hand, you had this other thing counterbalancing.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. Right. I look back on the 30s with a great deal of remorse and slight bitterness in the sense that I seem to have wasted so much time with this concept of picture-building. I remember that Juan Gris had written this article on organic form in the sense of perfect unity-the organic form as something to which nothing could be added and nothing could be taken away. And that was an obsession with me for many, many years. Then later on-well, now, I feel that that was wrong. It tended to a certain kind of stiffness and academicism in my thinking. I wish I hadn't thought of painting as having been so rigid and structured, you know, everything structured in its place. Well, this is the whole Neo-plastic movement, it's the whole pure abstract movement. It seems to me that this was the great contribution that a guy like Pollock made when he started to break down this Cubist bounding; everything was bounded in Cubism. Everything was circumscribed in Cubism. So that I think was a great, great contribution.

MR. SANDLER: Then you use the idea of organic form, would the opposite of that be geometric form?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. The opposite of that. It's a simple thing; in nature all growing forms, all obvious growing forms like animals, plants-are flowing, the lines are always flowing, they're always free-flowing lines. The straight edge doesn't exist in this kind of a growing form. So that's actually what I meant when I said that Cubism was always somehow an unnatural thing as far as I was concerned; and Neo-Plasticism. Now looking back to it because I get so much gratification in the opposite approach, in the organic approach to form. This is an interesting aesthetic problem. We had no clarity at all on this in the 30s. In other words-I said this earlier in the talks-that there was just a concept of modern art and as far as we were concerned Matisse and Picasso, Mondrian and Soutine all represented modern art. They were all in the same pot. And now it's clear as anything that they were going in different directions. And the aesthetic of one negated the aesthetic of the other. You couldn't synthesize that aesthetic. I think now the young people-I don't know if they are clear about it-but the young people should be clear that one is not better than the other, but there's a difference between an organic approach to form and a kind of geometric-well, now what they call hard-edge, approach to form. I guess they're both equally valid. But I feel that for me that relatively rigid geometric approach was not good, it was not satisfactory. Now I like the other so much more. I'm sorry I ever did the geometric thing. Which I didn't do too much of. But I did it nevertheless.

MR. SANDLER: Then the organic form carries with it all sorts of meanings having to do with a kind of humanist content almost it seems like even symbolizing things like life, life processes.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. Yes. I hope to do some kind of an article on that, make some kind of statement on that. I've thought about it a good deal. I think it's an extremely important concept but one which is grievously old-fashioned now in terms of the Constructivist art that you see around. For example, I think Nakian represents organic form very, very beautiful; where it's not the simple biomorphic form of [Jean] Arp or [Constantin] Brancusi; it's much more involved, it's much great I think much better. But the concept of a living form. Whereas the constructivists work that you see now, and which is in many cases very fine, tends to be more intellectual.

Tends to be more conceptual.

MR. SANDLER: Then the idea of ambiguity would also enter in because an organic, social, broken, painterly form would be far more ambiguous than the geometric form.

MR. MCNEIL: Right. Right.

MR. SANDLER: But in the 30s, too, would that have been one of the reasons-?

MR. MCNEIL: No one ever talked about ambiguity until, say, five years ago.

MR. SANDLER: That's true.

MR. MCNEIL: No one ever knew it existed.

MR. SANDLER: But in the 30s might that be one of the reasons that artists leaned perhaps to Miró or even to Arp?

MR. MCNEIL: They didn't very much. Gorky did. But on the whole there was not much influence there.

MR. SANDLER: And Kandinsky would have been even less?

MR. MCNEIL: Kandinsky was a geometric painter by 1920.

MR. SANDLER: Yes. But his earlier things?

MR. MCNEIL: No one knew that work very much. Actually-what was it called-The Museum of Non-Objective Art [(Replaced by the Guggenheim Museum in 1956) New York, NY]-

MR. SANDLER: That's right.

MR. MCNEIL: -showed his works. And the early things were very fine. They influenced me very much. But not in the 30s. I mean in the early 30s like 1928, 1929, 1930, let's say. They influenced me when I was first moving toward abstract art, when I read his book, which in English I think is *The Spiritual Harmony of Art*.

MR. SANDLER: Yes, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* [Originally published in 1914 as *The Art of Spiritual Harmony*, Wassily Kandinsky].

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. And I was always interested in him. And then I would see the paintings and they would evoke a memory. In other words, if I saw them in 1938 I would then remember my feelings of 1928 and say, you know, these are fine paintings; why didn't he continue in this direction? But then when he started to make the geometric things I guess around 1916 it seemed to me he became a very, very minor artist, academic abstract artist-not better than, say, [Willi] Baumeister or anyone like that.

MR. SANDLER: When is Soutine looked hard at?

MR. MCNEIL: I don't remember.

MR. SANDLER: The Museum of Modern Art had a large retrospective I think around 1950.

MR. MCNEIL: Right.

MR. SANDLER: I just wondered if he was-

MR. MCNEIL: I think he was in the background somewhere. It was Picasso and the Cubists who just overwhelmed everything in the 1930s, you know, Léger; and then Mondrian had this enormous influence in America. If you went to the American Abstract Artists and sort of analyzed the style I guess ninety-five percent of the membership-surely ninety percent, would have been in what we call today a hard-edge direction; geometric abstraction, neo-plastic by some, but others just straight geometric abstraction. So Soutine in that sense was in the background. I think it wasn't until later when abstract expressionism came in that one looked again at Soutine with a very admiring eye. I'm sure that there was never a time that I didn't know about Soutine and I didn't appreciate Soutine. But we were so involved in abstraction and this silly idea of organic unity that that was an obsession. So you wouldn't feel that this man had something vital to give to you in the same sense that you wouldn't think that Bonnard had something vital to give to you, or even that Matisse had something vital to give to you. All representational art in a certain sense and everybody was sort of-there's no good word for it-if you say progressive it sounds corny. But those who were trying to make a new art were all pushing toward abstract art of some kind or another. So almost by dint of a lazy approach to art, they tended not to look at

Matisse or Soutine as men of great influence or great importance. They just appreciated them for what they were.

MR. SANDLER: Of course, the whole point of view was different in the 30s, too. The talk would have been about purity, universals.

MR. MCNEIL: No, we never talked about that. The artists might have had that in the back of their minds but in the Abstract Artists group there was almost never any theoretical discussion. It was always a practical discussion, you know, putting on exhibitions and things like that. And then when the artists got together afterwards they never talked about things like that. And they don't do it anymore.

MR. SANDLER: What was the tenor of the talk then? When you met, say at that-

MR. MCNEIL: Gossip, gossip, gossip. And what was happening in the art world, the goings-on in the art world. But never serious conversations. And don't forget there was always politics, the social politics in this time, what was happening in the Artists' Union, what was happening on the Project, this kind of a world. There were all kinds of schisms-there was the gravest schism between the C.P. [Soviet Communist Party] regulars, or the C.P. sympathizers and the Trotskyites.

MR. SANDLER: And this also manifested itself in the A.A.A.?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. Very clearly in the A.A.A. There was a distinct schism there in the A.A.A. with a group of people who were-

MR. SANDLER: Several other members of the A.A.A. mentioned that to me and said that very frequently people would be left out who might have been in, because of their political orientation.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, I think so. And now it's all like a big joke. It looks as though the Trotskyites were right really and truly.

MR. SANDLER: And yet in a curious way things tended in the art world I would imagine to be rather more open. I understand that *Art Front* would run articles by abstract artists.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. But they would tend to use articles by those people who were sympathetic to the broad direction of the Left-of the C.P. politics. Although it can't be documented, I think it can be generally stated that the leaders of the Artists' Union were C.P. oriented. Now when Stuart Davis was very active in the Artists Congress, and I guess to a certain extent in the Artists' Union was always leftist in his sympathies, progressive in his sympathies. So they would favor him. I don't know if he ever wrote any articles but certainly he was close to these people. And correctly so. Because it just happened that the policy of the C.P. coincided with the welfare of the artists. They were the ones who did all the work. They were the ones who organized the picket lines and were beaten up. This man who was killed in Spain-I can't remember his name now-a very devoted man, I remember him just being beaten with clubs at one of those sit-ins that we had-now the tragic thing is I can't remember his name-I can't remember anybody's name so that's all right.

MR. SANDLER: Was there any bad blood between the Artists' Union and the American Abstract Artists?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, yes. I think there was built-in bad blood between their social protest orientation and anything which was not social protest. They knew that modern art in the world was the most viable form of art, so they looked at us as a very serious threat to their own program, or to their own status, and also in a very strange way psychologically they probably had great feelings of guilt about this because, you know, they themselves would have to be interested in these modern forms.

MR. SANDLER: One thing that I always wondered about, you know, given the orientation of the decade, the extreme social awareness then, there is built within geometric abstraction, say, particularly that of Mondrian or the Bauhaus, or Russian Constructivists, a kind of Utopian social rationale.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes.

MR. SANDLER: Would that have been one of the reasons-

MR. MCNEIL: They laughed at that I think. They laughed at that, the C.P. people.

MR. SANDLER: Yes, but what about the Abstract Artists? Did it give them any kind of sustenance?

MR. MCNEIL: No, I don't think so. No. This is what I feel myself very strongly. But you can't say it to anyone who is interested in Constructivist art, and I'm using this as a general term for the whole field, because it seems to me that this can change the whole environment, you see. I mean all of these constructions which I made in the

sense of architecture, for example, would, you know, just be divine. I don't see it as a great spiritual manifestation, excepting Mondrian. You see Mondrian always floors me. I can't get over it. But the other artists seem to me to be extremely, say, socially oriented in their work. Like that famous penguin pool in London which had these abstract shapes as ramps, and so forth.

MR. SANDLER: Or the Saarinen Arch in St. Louis which is probably the greatest piece of minimal sculpture.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. Exactly. So all this just seems to me to have the greatest bearing on society. And I'm all for it. I would like to get rid of all this junk that you see around and just have the most beautiful forms in our environment. It doesn't seem to me that that meets the spiritual needs of man as far as art is concerned. But it's a very open problem. Every so often like with Mondrian I use the word beautiful-but I mean extremely, extremely gratifying spiritually.

MR. SANDLER: But this raises another problem. You're implying that the kind of geometric form that these other artists used would lend themselves to public places. What about your own work? What about the organic form there?

MR. MCNEIL: No, it doesn't. It's more like poetry. It's more like music. It's made first of all because I have to make it. And then it should have certain psychological significances. It should have a certain kind of spiritual meaning which I associate with art in general. But one of the things that I've been very concerned with over the last years is that I see this very strong dichotomy between the romantic expressionist trend and the classical trend. And it seems to me to be quite clear. I was going to use the word "beautiful" before, like the Mondrians are beautiful, and this means that probably almost all of this Constructivist art does have a potential to be an absolutely beautiful form; like a Brancusi is an absolutely beautiful form. But a lot of this Constructivist-

MR. SANDLER: Beautiful almost equaling perfection?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. Right. Which is something completely different then from what I'm interested in, which is much more Existentialist in nature and which tends to sound out certain reverberations of human experience where they're not spelled out. I think that's what you meant when you said that about humanism in relation to organic form before.

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: But there are resonances in the forms that I use and it becomes more figurative all the time. But I make a difference between this kind of a confessional statement-I know that the critics of this kind of art use that in a derogatory sense, this artist's confession-but I don't care. It is highly personal, it is highly subjective, and it is a kind of symbolizing of certain personal needs. It's only bad if it rests on a level of breast eating, that kind of confession. But if it's a forming of whatever deep feelings that you have, or the structuring of these deep feelings in a viable form, this is what I believe to be the highest form of art.

MR. SANDLER: You couldn't see yourself working for a public site?

MR. MCNEIL: No. I did this thing for the Williamsburg Housing Project on the WPA when I was on the Mural Project. It was never used. The canvas disappeared. But I tried to work the thing out logically. I made hundreds and hundreds of sketches and prior things. And I worked in a Neo-plastic manner. But then finally I had to make what amounted to a big easel painting, you know. I worked on a big painting, maybe two years. I don't know how big the painting was but it was maybe ten feet by twenty feet. I just treated that like an easel painting. And that's the only way I can do it. Now I've gotten to the point where if I were offered a commission of some kind I wouldn't take it. I'd say take what I've already made and use it. But I wouldn't make anything in terms of a commission.

MR. SANDLER: So it's almost as if there's something inherently antipathetic in the romantic expressionist kind of painting with the sort of public site we have today.

MR. MCNEIL: Well, I think it can be used. I don't think there's any antipathy in the final social basis of the art. I think the difficulty is in making something to order. I think there are so many artists today who have gotten so involved in the concept of pushing their work and of keeping themselves open in their work, and, you know, to use this Existential concept of every work being a kind of crisis situation that they just don't have to nerve to face up to making something and being sure that it's going to work. A funny thing happened, oh, a long time ago, four or five years ago, where I was asked to talk somewhere. The man who asked me didn't know me at all, it was just a routine thing. And he used a ploy: he said, "I understand that you make a very good painting demonstration." And I almost dropped-I almost fell, you know. I stuttered and I said, "No, no, you got me wrong. This is absolutely wrong. Whoever told you that?" The fact is, he probably says that to everybody. But I got hysterical-of all the people in the world. Afterwards I thought that I should have said to him, "Give me two years-like let me paint in front of the audience for two years and then maybe I'll get something for you." You know,

because almost everybody has this thing where they get stuck and they put a thing away for six months and then pick it up and work on it.

MR. SANDLER: To get back to a point that we raised earlier, George: the idea of a non-shape form has very frequently been called a field image.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes.

MR. SANDLER: Does that word-?

MR. MCNEIL: No, I hate the concept. Because it seems to me that's the decoration that I was talking about before. There are many of these field paintings which-they're just flat, they enhance the surface, and they may be charming, they may be fine, fine decorations. But there is this space in modern art that we seem to be part of what I call "heavy space" in Western art. In other words, if you go back to Giotto and the early artists it's given the Renaissance very markedly a sense of reality, a sort of space reality which implies significance. This human communication that we were talking about, or the psychological communication. So therefore, this kind of a concept of a field seems to me to be rooted in the concept of abstraction. If you're going to make an abstract image-and this is something which I can't understand at all, you see-

MR. SANDLER: Then you wouldn't consider Pollock a field painter?

MR. MCNEIL: Pollock can be by-what do you say-I can't think of the word now-but he can be considered like an edge field painter in the sense that that would be a weakness of his painting. If there is any weakness in his painting, it's this lack of structure which was a great contribution and yet a certain weakness at the same time. The overall painting I think was great in the sense that it freed us from the plane. But it had a certain kind of weakness, ingrown weakness, you might say. And I think that's the great difference between de Kooning and Pollock. De Kooning had the great, great sense of reality always in his work, while Pollock never had it to a pronounced degree.

MR. SANDLER: When you use the word "heavy", this is an idea that you would be very sympathetic to?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes.

MR. SANDLER: And would another word for that possibly be "plastic"?

MR. MCNEIL: No. Plastic is a terrible word.

MR. SANDLER: I mean, say, the way Hofmann used it.

MR. MCNEIL: Well, it might be in the sense that Hofmann used it-by the way, Hofmann has this heavy space. And it's very interesting that Hofmann's hard -edge paintings are not decorative. They do have that sense of reality that I keep talking about. What I mean by heaviness is the sense of reality, that when you look at the work it has a certain kind of bearing like a moment, it's a moment. It has-well, weight is obvious but I'm trying to think of something else; I know what I want to say, it arrests you, the thing arrests you. You just can't look at it in the sense of a transient experience; it stops you and makes you aware of its significances. By the way, now when I use the word "decorative" it's a very strange one. I make a difference between what I call high decoration and ordinary decoration. I would say [Jean Antoine]Watteau is a high decorative artist. I would say Matisse is a high decorative artist. And Mondrian is a high decorative artist. And in this sense it's a wonderful, wonderful contribution to our lives. But I differentiate, you see, say, between a man like Rembrandt or [Francisco] Goya and these painters. Rembrandt and Goya have the heavy space which is weighed with human significance of one kind or another. And in all this field painting that you see around like Morris Louis and others, it seems to me to be essentially a two-dimensional experience. Which I would like to see in architecture. And this is what I mean when they get sore because they think I'm relegating them to being interior decorators. Which maybe, in a low way, I am; I don't mean to at all. But really to me, [Kenneth] Noland and Culley's work interests me but it interests me in a very, very slight way. I like their color and I like certain potentials of the color, but they never get beyond the surface, it seems to me.

MR. SANDLER: That's interesting because Jack Tworkov was once talking to me about ideas that he and Bill and others shared in the 40s. And instead of using the word heaviness, he talked about a picture full to the brim.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, that's what I mean. A certain density of human experience. That's what's so funny about minimal art where they want to, you know, take out every brush stroke. Well, I understand that. It's something that they can believe in to make perfection, I guess.

MR. SANDLER: Yes, I guess it would, you know. Nothing sloppy, nothing unseemly, nothing that calls too much attention to the idiosyncrasies or the creative process or the personality of the artist. Yes. But just focuses on the

perfection of the form. Yes, that would be it. Another thing that you talked about in this article that you wrote about ten years ago was the idea of spontaneity and its value to you.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. Well, we were just about ready to talk about that before. This is because in this damn structuring which is in my background so strongly, you'd be working on a thing, you know, for months and months and months and months and you just learn from experience that if you were trying to get something-you see, now this is the strange thing. I'm not sure now, I can't even remember how much I worked from nature in the 1950s, but I'm sure I always did. So therefore you have space in front of you. Right. You do have some kind of a stimulus there, you do have some kind of a subject there. And the point is to get it. The point is to seize it, what Cézanne always talked about, to realize it. So you're fighting to realize it. You're doing one thing here and another thing there. And this goes on for months and months and months and months. Then you learned that sometimes when you were so screwed up, so desperate, you would try and seize that image at once and it would almost always work out better than when you built and built and built, but only to build and tear down, and build and tear down, and build and tear down, and build and tear down. This is a problem which is very important in teaching and I don't know how to work it out because I'm sometimes impatient with the structuring of student's work because it seems sort of academic to me and I want the work to be freer. And yet maybe they have to go through this structuring stage and structuring stage because God knows I did. But the spontaneity now is something which I believe in more and more in the sense of the impossibility of building, you know. It's like beyond human ability, you might say. I see this drawing by Mercedes here in the magazine and this agonizes me because that's what she does and I just can't do it after a while. I just can't do it, that's all. So I have a tendency now more and more to try and seize the image all at once. I just keep working and working and working and I believe now very much in a certain readiness like when I am ready to do it then I try and do it.

MR. SANDLER: Then the key word there would be an attempt to literally find the image in the process of painting.

MR. MCNEIL: And grasp it.

MR. SANDLER: Grasp it and then the important thing would be a moment of recognition.

MR. MCNEIL: The important thing is to get something on the canvas that works and then when you look at it you say, "Well, that's not so bad," or something like that. Or you look at it and say, "That's not impossible." The point is you almost never get the total image at once. It's always 95 or 90 percent right and then the other lousy five percent kills you. I just read something by the poet John Housman in which he says exactly the same thing. It's a well-known statement. He used to get his poetry when he was out walking. First of all, he would have a lunch when he would have some beer and then he would be in a certain dopey state. Then he would go along walking and let images like lines of poetry come out as an image. He said sometimes a line would come out and sometimes whole paragraph would come out-now that's not right-what is it in poetry? A verse?

MR. SANDLER: A stanza?

MR. MCNEIL: A stanza! A whole stanza would come out. And he said the terrible thing was that there would be always just a few gaps in the whole thing. And that would ruin everything. In other words, he would get the original inspirations on this walk and then maybe months or a year would pass before he would be able to work on these elisions. Also, he said that when he was applying intelligence to completing it, it would be lost. That's my experience and it's a problem. We have this puritanical thing of feeling a need to work. And maybe the best thing to do would be to talk around and just get into your studio for one hour and work like fury and then make it or not make it. Kline must have done something like that, you know, make it or not make it.

MR. SANDLER: On the other hand, de Kooning, as I understand, whenever he could worked as constantly as he could just worrying it and worrying it.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. Do you think he does now though?

MR. SANDLER: I don't know.

MR. MCNEIL: Oh, I'm sure that in the early 1950s in those *Women* paintings they were tortured works, no doubt about it.

MR. SANDLER: George, this is an aside, but I'm kind of curious and I think it also may be a little bit illuminating-how do you teach? I mean, what do you strive for? What technique do you use?

MR. MCNEIL: Well, you ask me this at a very interesting point in my life because after being involved in creativity my whole life, I never really tried to figure out what creativity was. I was just as much of a subject matter painter, or a subject matter teacher, as the most obvious subject matter person where they put up a figure and say copy what you have. I have in the past always sort of turned my students to what you might call the

Cézanne-Cubist-expressionist direction where there might seem to be a contradiction between expressionism and Cubism but really there isn't actually. In other words, toward structuring and towards working from nature, but now more and more with the hope that they will overcome the strictures of nature and do what I'm trying to do, you know, make a symbol of the experience in some way. It's a great problem because I have a tendency to want to lean very heavily on the students in a puritanical way, in a Messianic way, and form them. And maybe that's not good at all.

MR. SANDLER: No, it can't be bad because you're not the only person they come in contact with.

MR. MCNEIL: Well that's very good. I hope so, yes.

MR. SANDLER: Because I know I sort of have this problem myself in wanting to sort of put what I believe across. And it used to worry me because I would say, well, after all, in an academic situation I ought to give them all sides. And I try that too. But on the other hand, I don't worry about it as much anymore.

MR. MCNEIL: Well, it's impossible for me to teach anything except my own prejudiced way. And I just have to keep pointing that out to students. At Pratt I only take those students who are sympathetic to my viewpoint. That's the only thing for an advanced teacher like myself. The advanced students don't want to study with someone who is good at three or four things. They want to study with someone who is, you know, maniacal about on thing whether it's hard-edge painting or realism or whatever it is.

MR. SANDLER: A thing that I'm curious about-we may have talked about this before-but this gets back to this statement that you made in the late 50s. You indicated that one of the things that Pollock in particular does was to paint an overall painting realizing total non-shape form. You say that this is far different from Synthetic Cubism, *The Three Musicians*, but that it sort of moves back to Analytic Cubism, a picture like *Ma Jolie*, the Picasso-the woman with the guitar, the Modern's painting.

MR. MCNEIL: Well, this is one of my pet gripes, you might say, or my pet obsession, that modern painting declined after 1912. I think there was a great period between 1905 and 1912 and even 1914. But it seems to me that all the great painters went down after this period. I guess I'm saying before the First World War actually, when you think of that painting of Léger, *The City*, I think that was 1919.

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: That was a great, great painting. And I'm sure Picasso painted great paintings in the 20s. I know he did. And in the 30s, exceptional paintings. But it seemed to me that the painting got tight after 1912 or 1914. And in the early period of Analytic Cubism it was opening up all the time and especially when it was most fractionated, most broken, most analytic. Like these portraits when they were broken so that you could see hardly anything. And then when they were bringing in psychological references like the materials, you know, the newspaper things. So it was very open. Then in a strange way it closed. This is something that it's very, very hard for me to understand. For example, I think Marin could have been a great, great painter. But it seems to me that, first of all, he had the curse of our American limited background, which shouldn't have hurt him because he had reference to the world. But he was hurt somehow by using this limited medium of watercolor. I think he could have been a tremendously expansive artist and I think his work has always had the possibility for great expansion. I would take that as a basic concept in art generally: that the form should expand because it's a spiritual concept. It should grow bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger in its spiritual implications. I think that modern art tended to become more and more cramped, more and more bounded by all these lines that these people were using. And in a strange way, you know, the painting of Matisse went down in the 20s and early 30s and then in the late 30s it came up wonderfully well again. Kandinsky is a fine example of what I'm talking about; he got trapped in these bounded forms. Now we talked about Soutine. Soutine was not in this; Soutine was an exception. But you have fondnesses. I'm not really sure how great an artist Soutine was. But I'm very fond of what he was doing. I'm very sympathetic. Even if I see a bad painting I'm ready to see all sorts of good things in it, you know. Like if I see a painting which is over-emotional I sort of ignore it and say that's a wonderfully free painting.

MR. SANDLER: How was Marin considered?

MR. MCNEIL: Not at all.

MR. SANDLER: Neither during the 30s or 40s?

MR. MCNEIL: Not at all. Not at all. It would have been corny to ever talk of Marin. It's a strange thing but true nevertheless. In other words, Marin really had a small art. Perhaps the French have some name for it like a minor painter.

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: But a great minor painter like Boudin I guess it's called a minor artist, a minor master.

MR. SANDLER: Yes, petit maître, I think it is.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, petit maître. And poor Marin would drop dead I guess if. . . But he really painted some very fine paintings. But they're always limited by this damn medium where you couldn't go into the painting. I mean it's always there on the outside in some strange way.

MR. SANDLER: Would [Milton] Avery have been-?

MR. MCNEIL: Never, never, never. Avery, Marsden Hartley, they were all part of the Artists' Union type of painting which when I say it now sounds snobbish. But it was always painting where there was some kind of a concept in the artist's mind or in the public's mind of what the culture expected, you know. I'm trying to be nice about that.

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: But it was art that was going to be successful; successful art, which if there's anything that's sure, is always absolutely destined to fail. I mean it's like built-in. Absolutely destined to go down. So while I don't think the American Abstract Artists did too much in the way of painting, the results did not come through. They were always trying to push experience. And that's one of my obsessions also. They didn't give a damn about the public or anything of that kind. They did their best.

MR. SANDLER: How would you assess the quality of A.A.A. works? There's this idea that's still around today that there was no good painting or painting of quality in the 30s.

MR. MCNEIL: Well, it's a strange thing; it's pretty true I'm afraid. Yes. I can't even bear to pick up those books on the American Abstract Artists because, first of all, I don't like my own work; and secondly, the spirit that was there really was an academic spirit that disturbs me now very much. I think we have been much better off in recent years. But some of the dogmas of these Constructivists people seem to me to be pretty much the same thing; they'll get themselves into a corner almost inevitably. I mean minimal art; I don't know how you can possibly see that except as a blind alley of some kind. So I think when you go back to the 30s it's just a sort of fact of life that for some reason or other the people were moving toward something. But there was very little actual painting that you'd like to put up. Take Gorky, for example. I don't think the things he did in 1930 were any good at all. I think Stuart Davis's were his own. I mean they were good, but they were not extraordinary.

MR. SANDLER: I don't think they were as good as what he did in the 50s.

MR. MCNEIL: Oh, no, no. Not at all. So it's just a strange cultural situation.

MR. SANDLER: There was another question; I don't know if we dealt with it before but even if we have, I'm curious about it. In the 30s there would have been a very strong respect, admiration, almost worship of the School of Paris. What happens in the late 40s. There seems to be a change.

MR. MCNEIL: I don't remember it diminishing.

MR. SANDLER: Well, what about the younger generation?

MR. MCNEIL: We were the younger generation.

MR. SANDLER: Yes, but what about the younger generation in Paris that comes up after the war.

MR. MCNEIL: You never heard of them. You never knew of them. In other words, people like [Alfred] Manessier and [Antoni] Tapies?

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: They were not known before 1940. They probably were around. For sure they were around.

MR. SANDLER: I mean Wols [Wolfgang Schulze], Soulages.

MR. MCNEIL: No, no one knew about Wols until after World War II.

MR. SANDLER: But then what happened after World War II?

MR. MCNEIL: Well, they were so bad. Wols was like a symbol of greatness and, you know, everybody respected the idea of Wols. But, my God, when you look at his paintings, they're nothing. They're just like surface

decorations of a certain kind. So that you're sort of stunned. The idea of Wols was great but then when you see the paintings now you say, my God, it can't be the same person that you remembered or thought about or talked about. No one saw any of these paintings. Where would you have seen them?

MR. SANDLER: What about Dubuffet?

MR. MCNEIL: Dubuffet came out after the war too.

MR. SANDLER: But do you feel sympathetic to him?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, I feel very sympathetic to Dubuffet, very sympathetic. But only in a certain period, only, say, up until 1952 or 1953. And then I think he's another example of an artist who went down. There's no comparison between what he did in 1950 and what he's doing now. I wouldn't look twice at what he's doing now.

MR. SANDLER: But I guess in terms of your own point of view he would be an artist that you would then at any rate have been interested in?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, I liked very much those things. And I still like them. I think maybe now they're too figurative and they're too cartoon-y, maybe, but nevertheless I still like them. I wish I owned one. That's for sure.

MR. SANDLER: I think they're priced way out.

MR. MCNEIL: That's for sure.

MR. SANDLER: Gosh, this idea of heavy space is an interesting one to me. But you don't think of any carry-over there with the idea of form? You know, the idea-well, you said in the sense that Hofmann used it you would be-

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, and I probably got this from Hofmann without remembering any specific-

MR. SANDLER: No, you were the first one that I've ever run into to put it in quite that way because the heaviness for you has humanist connotations. It did for Hofmann, too, but they tended to be kind of cosmic, you know, rather than humanist.

MR. MCNEIL: Well, he was the victim of this German mysticism, you know. He might have hated it and everything else but you can't help it growing up with all that around you, you know, like Becklein and [Franz] Von Stuck and all these people. Mysticism is very deep in the German psyche.

MR. SANDLER: Do you remember [Gerome] Kamrowski at school?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, I do. I don't remember his work very well. He went off into Surrealism, didn't he?

MR. SANDLER: Yes, he did.

MR. MCNEIL: He became I guess as much as any American did part of the Surrealist circle during the period of the war.

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: George, do you have time to head over to the studio?

MR. SANDLER: I do have time. Do you have time?

MR. MCNEIL: Oh, yes, sure.

[END OF TAPE 3, SIDE 1; BEGIN TAPE 3, SIDE 2]

MR. SANDLER: This is the second side of the third interview with George McNeil. I'm just going to wander around and see how this should pick up all over the room so we don't really have to worry at all about it. George, I notice that you stretch your canvases on a board and then you say you take them off?

MR. MCNEIL: Right.

MR. SANDLER: What is the advantage there?

MR. MCNEIL: I work so hard, I scrape off the paint so much, that if the canvas were on a regular stretcher it would gully and the canvas would stretch a great deal.

MR. SANDLER: You also worked on a predetermined size then?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. I've changed my sizes a little bit in the last year or so, or last couple of years. But previously I worked just on a square 76 by 76 inches. Now I'm going back to more four by five canvases.

MR. SANDLER: Smaller?

MR. MCNEIL: No. By proportions. Say, 60 by 75.

MR. SANDLER: I see. What is the value of size in your work?

MR. MCNEIL: Well, it has a very real reason because before when I started to make square paintings, it was easy to work on them from every side. If you take a dimension like four by five, it tends to have one or two directions like upside, or one side up. But when you work on just an almost square size, you can't turn the painting any way you want and keep turning it and turning it. And that was very important for me. I don't remember when I started to do that but it must have been around 1954 or so.

MR. SANDLER: You're suggesting that it's less important than to work from all four sides.

MR. MCNEIL: Now.

MR. SANDLER: Yes, I remember that was one of the things you mentioned a long time ago when I interviewed you. George, there were periods of time like rather recently that you would actually work from the model. Do you still do that?

MR. MCNEIL: You mean drawing from the model?

MR. SANDLER: Yes, drawing from the model.

MR. MCNEIL: I don't do that anymore much, but only because I don't get the opportunity.

MR. SANDLER: What was the advantage of that?

MR. MCNEIL: The advantage is that you get a sensate experience, you know, that you get your body into the work. And this is extremely stimulating as far as creativity is concerned. When I talk about heavy space it must mean that at some point I have a feeling of, you know, working from nature, it has significance to work from nature. So it's very, very stimulating to do this. To work with real things, in other words. You're talking about the figure of course?

MR. SANDLER: That's right.

MR. MCNEIL: So I would do it a great deal if I could. I'll show you some drawings.

MR. SANDLER: Do you also do that from landscape as well?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, I go out in the summer and paint directly from nature.

MR. SANDLER: What about the scene?

MR. MCNEIL: Well, I work on the waterfront mostly. There's a place opposite 42nd street and I have a little place there I go to. It's quite open, very nice. No one bothers me. All right. Now this year I did a lot of small paintings. I'm not sure if I have the same number of big ones as I had before, and I'm seeing these paintings now for the first time in a long time. I need to see things-

MR. SANDLER: How did you arrive at the particular dimension of your picture? I mean, what was the thinking that went into that decision, say, the 72 by 78?

MR. MCNEIL: It's a practical one where the canvas comes in 79 inches of width. So you make the biggest canvas fit into the width always. These canvases are 52 and 48 where these work in relation to a 54-inch canvas.

MR. SANDLER: How do ideas enter into the work, George? For instance, when you begin a picture like this, do you have at times any idea of the nature of the image?

MR. MCNEIL: No. No, never.

MR. SANDLER: So that's something that's always found?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. In talking about abstract expressionism sometimes there are silly things said, that the picture is a battlefield and all that sort of thing. But in a strange way there's all the difference in the world between this approach and the historical one. Let's say when people make drawings and then they enlarge the drawings, they

sort of knew what they were going to do. I think there are many, many painters now who have no sense at all of what they are going to do. And the painting keeps evolving in the course of their painting. When it does that it usually comes out in a very organic way because every part works with every other part. It's a very desirable approach for artists to do at some point or other. You get a very natural result; the form is natural. Now the big problem is to be wary of getting a too discreet image, you know, like a two-figured image. You keep working back and forth. What I'm trying to say I think is the danger of working in this free way, in this process way and have in mind always a certain kind of image that's going to evolve. But if you keep the painting open all the time-I work from these still-lives and the painting is always open and yet they almost inevitably go into a figure or a landscape.

MR. SANDLER: Yes. I guess in a sense one of the things that you always catch is a sort of gesture of a figure.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. Right, right.

MR. SANDLER: These pictures that you're showing me now, are there any that you at this point consider finished? Or might you just pick one up at any time?

MR. MCNEIL: I will always pick up the painting. It's extremely important to me to have the paintings around and keep passing them and then as I pass them I see possibilities and I keep changing them. But in the main the paintings that I have in this room that I'm showing you are finished. No painting is every finished but except there's something like this that I'll probably work on, it's pretty much finished.

MR. SANDLER: How do you determine that?

MR. MCNEIL: When it's finished?

MR. SANDLER: Yes. Does it have to do with the gesture of the figure?

MR. MCNEIL: When it just looks right, or practically right. I guess a picture never looks completely right. But it looks as much right as you can get it. And in the period when you're developing it, at other times you know it's not right. And then it comes together. That's when you say to yourself, "Well, that's the best I can do."

MR. SANDLER: This may be a silly question, but you tend to work with a rather heavy surface.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. I like that for some reason or other. It's not the best thing to do. But it's more sensate. I'm always concerned with this. I can't help it. I like the richness of the color. There are transparencies of course, but in the main I like a rich, heavy, tactile surface.

MR. SANDLER: There would always be the danger though of the image losing or not having presence and turning into a caricature?

MR. MCNEIL: There's always the danger of that. There's always the danger of caricature. You skirt that danger all the time. I have one over here to show you.

MR. SANDLER: Do you find yourself, George, without really wanting to, favoring a certain range of color?

MR. MCNEIL: I don't favor it but I go into the hot colors all the time.

MR. SANDLER: Yes I was thinking of that-hot yellows and oranges and then-

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, and I like those I guess because in the main they are most brilliant. In other words, I want the color to be as luminous as possible and so I over-emphasize those colors which are most congenial to this, which are the light colors. I don't know, I don't think it's good or bad particularly. It's bad in certain ways. When I had my show at the Wise Gallery, I was horrified when I first put it up that practically every picture was orange. I had to completely rearrange the show. But that's just a characteristic. I just don't know what to do about it. I'll do anything to force the color. And this just happens to be work of that character. The color tends to be more alive in these hot colors.

MR. SANDLER: Gee, this is a terrific picture, this one.

MR. MCNEIL: I've had a funny thing happen this year. I've painted more in time this year than I ever have in my life and yet I seem to have not painted as many paintings. It's a strange situation.

MR. SANDLER: Then one of the things that you do is constantly repaint a picture?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes.

MR. SANDLER: Although it looks as if it was probably done in one day it would be months and months of work?

MR. MCNEIL: Oh, yes. Months and months and months of work. I use those panels because I'm constantly scraping off so many colors and that is one of the reasons why this sensate thing-heavy pigmentation in a sense-it's just unwittingly built up.

MR. SANDLER: Your own painting would have I guess changed some of your attitudes say, to the attitudes that you wouldn't have had in the 30s, say, to the early Fauves?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, I never was interested in the Fauves in the 30s. That's very interesting. And now I am. Now I look back at that early Fauve period and it's exactly the same thing I was saying before. I can't understand why people like Vlaminck and Derain didn't continue and, you know, just produce the most marvelous paintings ever. And they didn't.

MR. SANDLER: The whole thing just lasted about three or four years and then Bingo!

MR. MCNEIL: Yes.

MR. SANDLER: Even Matisse changed. Maybe the only one who kind of held on a little bit was [Raoul] Dufy, and [Georges] Roualt.

MR. MCNEIL: And both unsatisfactory painters in other ways.

MR. SANDLER: Yes. Would this also apply to-would there be more sympathy now to, say, some German Expressionist works?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. Oh, yes. Like [Karl] Schmidt-Rotluff, for example. I haven't looked at these paintings in a long time so looking at them-I didn't even know it was a painting-I don't even know what painting is coming out here. This painting I think was relatively quick. I mean I don't think I painted too many paints. And now as I take them out I see things that bother me with the painting. This area up here bothers me somewhat. I don't know what I could do about it. But that's the organic thing, see; just something that doesn't fit into the rest of the painting. In my show, by the way, a lot of people saw an analogy between Nolde and my work. Which pleased me. I think Nolde when he's good is quite wonderful.

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: When he's bad he's terrible. Like I told my students, the worst thing I can say to them is that their painting is like German Expressionism because I think of someone like Beckmann whose work I can't stand. But there's a painting that Nolde made in about 1911 or 1912 of some dancing figures which is just a wonderful painting.

MR. SANDLER: It would seem to me though that there would be on difference between your work and theirs. There's this whole ingrained concern with what, say, Hofmann called plasticity.

MR. MCNEIL: The abstract character of the work, you mean?

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. My whole approach is always abstraction. And then the figure emerges from the abstraction. These are basically abstract paintings. There's not one that's a figure painting. You know the funny thing is this could be shown in almost any way-in any direction.

MR. SANDLER: Yes, it could.

MR. MCNEIL: But I think Nolde's painting isn't quite as rich in a figurative sense the way this is.

MR. SANDLER: No, certainly not. To me the shock of your last show was the-I guess the word would be power, you know?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes.

MR. SANDLER: Which very few artists-I don't know of any that has quite as much. And that is probably held against you.

MR. MCNEIL: Why?

MR. SANDLER: Oh, too unseemly.

MR. MCNEIL: Uncouth?

MR. SANDLER: Yes, too uncouth.

MR. MCNEIL: I can't get enough power. I can't get enough strength into the work. And I always want to get it stronger and stronger.

MR. SANDLER: The younger kids use the word "incredible" for this attempt to really get involved with the guts of things.

MR. MCNEIL: How can it be otherwise? That's what I don't-how can you stop at a certain point and say I'm going to limit myself and I'm not going to plan-

MR. SANDLER: Well, you don't really stop at that point. You almost begin with that point.

MR. MCNEIL: But I mean, how can young people say to themselves, "I won't try and do everything"? How can they stop at a certain point and say, "I'm going to be conservative at this point" if that's what they say?

MR. SANDLER: Well, you know there's an idea in your work aside from, you know, other words can be used aside from humanist. Like the artist as hero almost.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. That's a romantic idea.

MR. SANDLER: Yes. And the whole-not the whole-but one idea that many younger artists work with a sort of anti-romantic, anti-hero idea.

MR. MCNEIL: Right, right. And that's okay if they feel classical. But one of the things I talk to my students about all the time is sort of why paint if you're not going to get a great deal of joy out of it, you know; this thing of ecstasy and delirium. If you are of a certain mind where you're more controlled and you like to do a certain type of measured work, that's fine. But it would seem to me in general that this concept of great sensate pleasure, why deny yourself this? And then the idea of extension, of pushing yourself all the time seems to me to be a sort of a normal one. Like, how could it be otherwise? But I understand that someone can believe in mathematics and, you know quiet and study thing. It's completely alien to my way of thinking. I know that. And that's the whole difference between, say, the temper of the period up to 1960 and the present temper. I think whether we knew anything about Existentialism or now, we were involved in that. And now there's a latent strange conservatism which I can't understand.

MR. SANDLER: Well, Don Judd says that the only thing he asks of a work of art is that it be interesting.

MR. MCNEIL: Jesus Christ! His things are not interesting, whatever they are! They're anything but interesting.

MR. SANDLER: I think he means the idea.

MR. MCNEIL: Well then, why not just write about it and let people treat the idea that's involved in it. I feel very, very strongly on this. And I'd like to write something about idea painting. I think it's extremely unhealthy for painters.

MR. SANDLER: You know, there's another direction in figurative painting today-I guess the central position there would be Pearlstein-this extreme preoccupation with, say, the facts of the figure.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. Well, I don't understand that either. That to me is going back into a kind of prose, you know, where something is stated in a very matter-of-fact way. And that's okay. The artist has always been interested in that. But I don't understand that either. I can't understand it. You know, that's like a craft of some kind. And that's okay. The thing that is very pleasing to me is the excitement that I get out of working. Now I have a big thick figure down the hallway which I can't show you. It just came back from Texas. There was a big exhibition down there.

MR. SANDLER: Was that the Goodall about Painting About Painting?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, something like that-Painting as Painting.

MR. SANDLER: I didn't see anything about that. It seemed like a terrific show.

MR. MCNEIL: Isn't it something? The catalogue still isn't out. I wrote a piece for the catalogue. And it's just too bad that a show like that could not be seen in a larger context.

MR. SANDLER: How many people were in it?

MR. MCNEIL: Oh, a lot. Maybe sixty.

MR. SANDLER: That's a shame. Did you go down to see the show?

MR. MCNEIL: No.

MR. SANDLER: The smaller ones tend to be well, not that as much-but tend to be more frequently landscapes.

MR. MCNEIL: Right. And this is not planned. It just happens that way.

MR. SANDLER: Do you always work on the floor? What's the reason?

MR. MCNEIL: I work very liquid and the paint runs and I can walk around the painting and work on it in every direction. That's a figure. Can you see the figure?

MR. SANDLER: Yes. It's also curious that in your landscapes-and this is just an after-image I have-the palette tends to be more subdued.

MR. MCNEIL: Right, right.

MR. SANDLER: Another thing that seems to be happening in your work, George, is that there seems to be-I'm trying to find the exact words for it-although all of your old paintings had a sort of rawly-finished quality, it's even more pronounced in this last work.

MR. MCNEIL: That's very pleasing to me.

MR. SANDLER: Why?

MR. MCNEIL: Well, I want the experience to be as vibrant as possible. And I want it to be as real as possible. And it just seems to me that whenever you hold onto any kind of finesse, there's a slight artificiality about it. Life itself is a kind of unmade thing in some strange way and I just think that these approaches are more natural when there is this roughness. So it's very pleasing to me. The last thing I would want is to have some kind of painting as decoration, or painting as furniture, or something like that. So maybe I overdo it. But I don't do it on purpose. I just want to be as strong as possible.

MR. SANDLER: You know one of the things that has happened, and I know you're aware of, is the fact that, say, in the 60s a kind of work which is diametrically opposed to yours tends to really get the play. How does that affect you?

MR. MCNEIL: Well, I don't like it.

MR. SANDLER: No. But it hasn't in your case created any kind of demoralization?

MR. MCNEIL: No, it hasn't.

MR. SANDLER: It has to other people.

MR. MCNEIL: I know it has. And I feel very sorry for them. I think this is one of the reasons why I keep saying to young painters that they should develop work habits, you know, whether you feel good or you don't feel good, just go ahead and work. And don't let yourself be influenced by these things outside of you one way or the other. So it's very sad that these guys are in any way influenced by society. Because all you have to do is go back to the 1930s or 1940s and look at the work which got the great favorable criticism at that time, and it's usually ghastly. That doesn't mean that that's true today.

MR. SANDLER: No.

MR. MCNEIL: Naturally you don't want to take the attitude that you're a misunderstood genius or something like that, and the world is wrong. But what you do have to insist on is that good or bad, you must keep working.

MR. SANDLER: Which you do do?

MR. MCNEIL: That's right. If it's accepted, that's fine. If it's not accepted, that's a kind of hard luck, that's all. Well, there may be some others in here but in the main that's the-

MR. SANDLER: In some of these small ones, even more than the large ones, you also work with a kind of figure turning out into landscape or landscape turning back into the figure.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. Well, that's the organic thing. I never deliberately make it. It's a very funny thing. I never

deliberately put it in. It's always a discovery when it comes out. I work on these abstractly. This one is a little bit different. That's an older painting that I just picked up and worked on. I like to keep these things around me for years and years and I keep on working on them. I have about maybe fifteen paintings here which are just haunting me; I just keep working and working on them.

MR. SANDLER: I can't tell if these are oil? Or-

MR. MCNEIL: Oil, yes.

MR. SANDLER: You don't work with acrylics then?

[NOTE: From here to the end of the tape there is very much noise and often it is impossible to hear what is being said.]

MR. MCNEIL: Sometimes I work with acrylics but very, very seldom. Almost nothing in years.

MR. SANDLER: What is it about the medium--?

MR. MCNEIL: It's too thin. And you can't work over it; that's the main thing. You know you can only paint on it about twice and then it goes dead.

MR. SANDLER: So you find the oil tends to give you a more live surface?

MR. MCNEIL: Oh, yes.

MR. SANDLER: But it's also much slower?

MR. MCNEIL: Slower drying, yes. That doesn't bother me too much though. I've learned to work with that. Well, that's it.

MR. SANDLER: You used the word "organic" in two interrelated ways, one having to do with the kind of form, and the other having to do with the whole painting.

MR. MCNEIL: The whole painting. That's really what I mean by organic; the whole painting is one thing, one kind of form which I would hope would have the semblance of a living thing; one part going into the other part so the painting is one whole thing.

MR. SANDLER: And it's really at that point that the whole, say heritage, the conception of a unified modern painting comes in?

MR. MCNEIL: Well, never consciously. When you talk to painters I don't think they ever think about it. You almost never hear them talk about organic form. But that's true. But it was only done in a kind of incipient, instinctive way. I don't know. A lot of the painting that's around now certainly is very discreet painting.

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: Discreet and hard-edge painting is very separatist, you might say, in its character.

MR. SANDLER: I wondered about one thing, George. Would it have been possible for you-again this is a bad question-would it have been possible for you to be able almost to carry off this kind of painting without that other kind of schooling you came up against, as it were, the whole Constructivist tradition, the Cubist tradition?

MR. MCNEIL: I don't know. I just don't know.

MR. SANDLER: Do you find that any of your students who work in this vein can carry the one off without the other?

MR. MCNEIL: Well, none of them work as freely as this. They tend to work in an abstraction where the forms are fairly clear, some forms are fairly clear, or they tend to work from the figure. But some of my students do work which absolutely astonishes me in terms of the treatment [inaudible].

MR. SANDLER: And the heaviness at the same time?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. Now there is a danger I think in my teaching-I tend to make students move [inaudible]. One of the things, you see, which surprises me is that in literature there's a continuation of a strong trend for experience being more and more vivid and more and more exciting and more and more anguished. And yet in painting it seems there's less and less of an interest in this, and there seems to be more and more of an interest in surface experiences, like field painting. This concept is a very aggravating one. In other words, I should think

that there would always be a latent interest in experience-more and more intense and more and more poignant. So I just don't understand the safeness of much of the painting of the young people. It's as though they believe in [inaudible] painting. I believe in something called experience more. I'm always trying to give the edge to experience, push the communicative potential of the work. And if I use figures, it's because I think that they add something to the communication value. But they all come out of an abstract basis, or practically. In other words, when they don't, then they fail as far as I'm concerned. I've done more drawing this year than I've ever done in my life.

MR. SANDLER: Are these drawings from the model?

MR. MCNEIL: No. They are not. Now these are somewhat constructivist in character. And I worked like hell on these. I worked a very long time on these.

MR. SANDLER: By constructivist-

MR. MCNEIL: You see, the planes-

MR. SANDLER: Because the planes are more clearly defined?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes.

MR. SANDLER: That's curious, George, because had you not mentioned that they were still-lives I don't think it would have occurred to me.

MR. MCNEIL: No. That's a strange thing. I find it very intriguing.

MR. SANDLER: I would have thought of something like this as a figure.

MR. MCNEIL: I'm coming to the figure?

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. Yes, I'm going to try and learn how to make lithographs so I'm working in the lithograph medium. I'm just having an awful time. I just can't seem to make it do what I want to do. Whereas this charcoal is very sympathetic to it. You see there's a likeness in here. I don't know if you can see that or not. The general character- see a figure here-

MR. SANDLER: It may not be a very pertinent question, but do you ever work with more than one figure?

MR. MCNEIL: [Inaudible.]

MR. SANDLER: The ones you destroyed?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes. This will come in the future. Most of these are just studies. This is that lithograph.

MR. SANDLER: And you say all of these were based on a still-life?

MR. MCNEIL: That one right there.

MR. SANDLER: These two, too?

MR. MCNEIL: Yes, sure.

MR. SANDLER: But these are more explicitly figurative and more explicitly erotic.

MR. MCNEIL: Well, they might be older ones but that doesn't mean they're not still-lives; we're going back now. The first ones I showed you were the last ones.

MR. SANDLER: I see.

MR. MCNEIL: [Inaudible.]

MR. SANDLER: What was that?

MR. MCNEIL: I suppose it could work out if I want to see the figure there.

MR. SANDLER: [Inaudible.]

MR. MCNEIL: But this I know is out of [inaudible]. It's one of the most successful that I have [inaudible] material.

MR. SANDLER: Do you tend to work with a graph on some of these, or when you make the translation it just doesn't seem to have the kick?

MR. MCNEIL: It goes dead. So I have to [inaudible]. I like to do it. The strange thing to me is [inaudible] exhibit something like this. It's too crude. And yet we have, you know, 60 or 70 years of modern art around a lot of the Constructivist stuff that's around now seems to be tending toward tastefulness. This stuff is not wanted in exhibitions, in a strange way.

MR. SANDLER: However, that may change, too, because I think the notion of any style being avant-garde is dying and dying very quickly because I think that the notion has become an untenable one. And what may happen there is that we're going to really get a multi-art-

MR. MCNEIL: Yes.

MR. SANDLER: -in a much bigger way than we've had in the past eight or ten years.

MR. MCNEIL: It doesn't seem to be in the offing though because there isn't a single critic now, and there isn't a single gallery now which is sympathetic to this kind of impressionistic work. Not even one critic, you know, goes out of his way to express interest in the work.

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: Which is a strange factor considering, you know, so much of the history of modern art is in this direction.

MR. SANDLER: Sort of interesting.

MR. MCNEIL: [Inaudible] sympathetic to more-well, "daring" is a funny word to use, but something like that. See there's no figure in this painting.

MR. SANDLER: Except there seems to be on here.

MR. MCNEIL: But one does come to every part of the painting would be [inaudible] to every other part. This is what I mean. Some of these paintings [inaudible] much over a year and the longer I work on them the more [inaudible.] See how I scrape the paint?

MR. SANDLER: Yes.

MR. MCNEIL: [Inaudible] box like this filled with paint scrapers. Here's a painting that's almost finished. I haven't seen this painting for a year. Now that I look at it I see things to be done... Now that painting was haunting me. I just have to wait until I see.

MR. SANDLER: But it's got marvelous structure.

MR. MCNEIL: Well, I think that's it.

MR. SANDLER: Are you going to remain here, George?

MR. MCNEIL: No, I'll drive you down to the-

MR. SANDLER: How far is it?

MR. MCNEIL: Oh, it's not far at all. I can get you there very, very quickly.

MR. SANDLER: This is the end of the second side of the third interview.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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