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Oral history interview with John Opper, 1968 Sept. 9-1969 Jan 3

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with John Opper on September 9, 1968, October 15, 1968 and January 3, 1969. The interview was conducted by Irving Sandler for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

IRVING SANDLER: This is the first side of the first interview with John Opper on September 9, 1968. John, the whole idea of this project is to really go into depth and just, you know, start at the beginning. How did you get interested in art?

JOHN OPPER: Well, I think my interest in art started in high school. Actually I suppose even before that it began maybe at the elementary school level. As a youngster I always loved to copy great historical figures out of history books. I'd make drawings of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln. And it's very strange, one of the memories I have of going into art. I remember in the sixth grade the teacher had some sort of activity. It was a kind of farm yard program and the kids were drawing animals and I drew a series of pigs that everybody liked. And I think that probably started me off, the very fact that I ---

IRVING SANDLER: That you got success from it.

JOHN OPPER: Yes. And I did enjoy drawing. I copied most of the time. I wasn't satisfied with drawing directly from nature. Which was strange. Educationally the idea of copying used to be frowned upon. But I got a great deal of satisfaction from copying because I wasn't satisfied with trying to draw an original flower. I could copy it, but I didn't have enough knowledge of technique to do it. And then in high school I took a couple of art courses.

IRVING SANDLER: Where was this?

JOHN OPPER: In Cleveland, Ohio. And I wasn't an unusual student. I hated the art courses, as a matter of fact. They had two teachers and the person in charge was an elderly person and very academic and at the time much involved with minute painting and all this. And I couldn't stand it. I loved to do it. But I couldn't stand working day after day making maybe an area of an inch of cross-hatching or putting some little dots for about an hour and a half. In high school I decided I wanted to be an artist. Which meant of course to be a commercial artist, there was no such thing as being a fine artist. My father heard that commercial artists were doing fairly well, so he wasn't too much opposed to it. So I signed up for these correspondence courses.

IRVING SANDLER: Oh?

JOHN OPPER: Yes. I even remember the name of it – Meyer Booth Correspondence School, which came out of Chicago. And I did the lessons. And I also began to discover other people who were interested in art through the art lessons and through the high school. We'd go to the Cleveland Museum. And there I met sever other artists – I mean art students. And in Cleveland, too, there was a kind of association similar to the one down on the East Side. Do you know what I'm referring to? – Henry Street ---?

IRVING SANDLER: That's right. Settlement House.

JOHN OPPER: It was a kind of settlement house. I don't recall the name was. But they did have a couple of art classes there. And there I met, as I say, other people. And I also began to go to art classes at the Cleveland Museum of Art on Saturday mornings. And about that time, too, they had a night school for commercial artists and students interested in commercial art where they had a model posing. That was my first experience drawing from the nude. And I looked forward in anticipation of what I was going to see with excitement. Oh, she was a very beautiful girl and all that. But I new I was an artist because I just wanted to draw. And I went there for a while.

IRVING SANDLER: This was while you were in high school?

JOHN OPPER: All this was going on while I was in high school. So by the time I graduated from high school I had decided personally that I was going to be at least a commercial artist, if not more. But in the back of my mind I did not really want to go into commercial art. The type of work that I saw at the Cleveland Museum was the Ashcan School – Frank Duvenek, George Bellows, Robert Henri and ---

IRVING SANDLER: This would have been around when?

JOHN OPPER: This would have been 1925 or 1926. I graduated, I think, in 1927. And I went to the Cleveland School of Art. The Cleveland School of art at the time I was there was very, very conservative, very traditional, mostly followed the lines of the whole French traditional school.

IRVING SANDLER: Real academic?

JOHN OPPER: Real academic. I started out drawing from casts in charcoal. And part of our project would be drawing the ear of Michelangelo, or the nose, or the mouth. We'd render that very carefully. And we had an art history course, very brief and very superficial. In one year I had the whole span of art from the early Egyptians right through the contemporary Americans. I recall in the art courses we painted from still lifes – they were watercolors. And we had rendering classes were we tried to match the image we were drawing by the material.

IRVING SANDLER: You mean render textures?

JOHN OPPER: Render textures of various kinds. And I was one of the better students. The school wasn't too large. There were about 300 students in all four grades – all for years. Out of the 300 perhaps there were about 75 men. The Cleveland School of art had a little bit of a finishing school quality to it. It really had serious painters there. There were quite a few. Augustus Patton at Brooklyn was a fellow classmate of mine.

IRVING SANDLER: Ah!

JOHN OPPER: He started out about the same time. He's the only one I know here that you probably know.

IRVING SANDLER: Were there any of the teachers that you remember?

JOHN OPPER: The teachers, yes. There were several that impressed me. There was again a very old academician Keller – what was his name – I can't remember it. Oh! Have you ever heard of Henry Turner Bailey?

IRVING SANDLER: No.

JOHN OPPER: Henry Turner Bailey was at this school. He was a great art educator influence in this period. If you pick up any book of the twenties and into the thirties – he introduced a new system where every morning we all met as a group in the auditorium and he would talk to us about art in general. He was a wonderful speaker and a wonderful guy. And a terrible painter. He did these beautiful little sunsets, kid of Turner quality but very bad Turners. But he was a nice person.

Henry Keller is the man I was trying to think of. He was the big person at school. Also an academician. They were all academicians. There was only one man that I had ever heard mention contemporary art or speak of contemporary art or ever mentioned a man like Matisse or Picasso in class, or any work that was going on in Europe. And he was Hungarian. He taught basic design. And he was the firs man that I became interested in other than trying to imitate the image, and, you know, more or less compositional pattern. But we got very little. The other thing that began to influence me toward the modern direction was the Pittsburg International. You know, Cleveland by train is only a couple hours form Pittsburgh.

IRVING SANDLER: And you would get down to see those?

JOHN OPPER: Well, there'd be an excursion. They'd have excursions on Saturday and Sunday. And all the art students, all the serious art students went to see the Carnegie International. And that was the first time I saw Picasso's work. The first time I saw Matisse, Braque, or Rouault, or any of the fellows who were still painting. Even Monet. I remember seeing his work. He had just about died, I think in 1925. They did have a memorial show of some kind and they had a roomful of his work. And at the time I was terribly disturbed by what I saw. My whole training had been more or less to have some kind of likeness. And here these fellows were doing something different. There were two or three of us and we giggled, but at the same time we weren't quite sure we were right. There was that kind of thing. Because we were very much impressed. I remember being impressed by Matisse's work. Because this Hungarian – I can't even recall his name – the design teacher – his sense of color, his sense of pattern I could see it. It was quite obvious. But nevertheless while this was in the back of my mind I was still one of the better realists in school.

IRVING SANDLER: Well, were there any students there who were at all involved in modern ideas? Was there any talk at all?

JOHN OPPER: None that I can recall. Well, the most modern – Clarence Carter – you may have heard of him – he was a watercolor painter. And he began to paint in a kind of Charles Demuth style in a simplified form, simplifying the image. He was one of the first. And there was another fellow who wasn't much of a painter but he did very good in the graphics area. And he began, too, to simplify the image. Both were still doing imagery. Neither of them went so far that you couldn't see the image that they were doing. But they were the only ones that I can remember.

IRVING SANDLER: Then what happened?

JOHN OPPER: At that time I became kind of dissatisfied with the Cleveland School of Art. And I went to Chicago. Stayed in Chicago and went to the Chicago Art Institute for a while. I worked for my uncle half a day and went to the Art Institute half a day.

IRVING SANDLER: What were you doing?

JOHN OPPER: I just painted from still life.

IRVING SANDLER: No, I mean what were you doing for your uncle.

JOHN OPPER: Oh, he had a kind of clothing store. I did all sorts of things. Odds and ends. I never did much of anything. I think he was just being generous.

IRVING SANDLER: And this was in Chicago that you were working form the still life? While at the Art Institute?

JOHN OPPER: Yes.

IRVING SANDLER: And this would have been when?

JOHN OPPER: This was 1927 – 1928. That's correct. Yes, because I remember when I started Lindbergh had just flown across the Atlantic. Well, I was a kid. I stayed a year. And then returned to Cleveland. I decided that I wanted to get some education besides the straight art courses. So I took a combined course at Western Reserve which permitted me to take courses there and also courses at the Cleveland School of Art. So I continued painting and also going to – it became almost as if art were my major. And I got a degree at Western Reserve.

IRVING SANDLER: Well, in Chicago was there anything different at the Institute from what you had in Cleveland?

JOHN OPPER: Not at the time I was there. Not much, no. You know it's really amazing. With the exception of New York – of course in New York I know there was – I don't know whether in the late twenties there was too much going on – but it's amazing that there was so much activity going on in Europe, in France and that it was so ignored here.

The same people that were considered very great in Cleveland were also considered very great in Chicago. I remember in Chicago there were some qualities I disliked more than I did in Cleveland. They tended toward the stylized thing and everybody was out to set up his own little style. Oh, I should mention in Cleveland a painter that I liked very much – though he never really influenced me – was Abbot Thayer. And the things that I like about his work were not his finished work. He had a lot of what they would call unfinished sketches and those had very much the same kind of quality you would find in Constable, you know. His unfinished paintings were really his great paintings. And when he finished them he lost that vitality, that personal vitality. In Cleveland I got my degree.

IRVING SANDLER: This was at Western Reserve?

JOHN OPPER: At Western Reserve.

IRVING SANDLER: Would that have been four years, John?

JOHN OPPER: That was a four-year course. They gave me credit for a year of Cleveland School of Art. I took another year or two of academic work and they give me a degree of B.S. in Art. By that time I had decided that commercial art was completely out. Oh, by the way, when I was in Chicago I attempted to do commercial art and I worked in a studio. I didn't like it at all. There wasn't enough freedom of expression. And I decided then that I was going to be the greatest painter in the world. I graduated from Western Reserve just at the beginning to the Depression in 1932. The Depression really struck then. And I had had a little job while I was in Cleveland. I taught after school working for Karamou House – a settlement house – and Karamou Theater was part of it. It was in a Negro section and I had black students I taught metalwork and sketching to. This was after school for them and for me. It was late afternoon and early evening classes. That paid me about $75 a month. And I did that for awhile while I was in school. When I graduated there was nothing in Cleveland to do. There was no possible opportunity. But I did try for two years. I didn't come to New York until

1934. And I didn't really come to New York. I went to Gloucester and that's when I really first came in contact with modern art.

IRVING SANDLER: How did that happen?

JOHN OPPER: Hans Hofmann was teaching at a school there for that summer, 1934.

IRVING SANDLER: The Thurn School, yes.

JOHN OPPER: Ernest Thurn. He was a painter of boats. Well, of course, I saw Hofmann around. I lived in a fisherman's house. Do you know Gloucester?

IRVING SANDLER: Just a little bit.

JOHN OPPER: Part of Gloucester is what they call the neck and extends right out into the ocean. And I lived on the neck.

IRVING SANDLER: Why did you decide on Gloucester?

JOHN OPPER: Just that I heard about it, that it was a nice spot to paint. Nice scenery. And there was a granite works there and fishing boats. Very picturesque place. So, I decided to go there and paint for the summer. In the same house where I stayed there was a young girl who had come from New York and was a very pretty girl and Hans Hofmann always liked pretty girls. And I did get to meet him. And he was very kind. He looked at my work and told me I had a good sense of color and that I ought to think of working in a more modern vein instead and start finding out what it's all about. Well, that confused me terribly because after spending all this time then to find out that there's a new world completely, a world I was not aware of. Well, I decided not to go back to Cleveland but to come to New York. And I came to New York with a friend. The only reason we could do it was that we had an idea of distributing prints and we got nine good artists of the time – the best one I think was Carl Holty – to do plates for us and we did our own printing. And the idea was distribute them as a group to the schools and museums. And we managed to exist for a year on that, but just barely. They were very inexpensive – thirty dollars for the whole set.

IRVING SANDLER: But even so ---

JOHN OPPER: Carl Holty – I have on the wall.

Well, we did that and we managed to live here. And in the meantime Estelle and I got married. Estelle was working and more or less supporting me. Then I took a job as an art teacher working with Hawthorne Cedar Grove School which was one of the schools for I guess delinquent boys and girls. I met another young man who was interested in psychology. He said, "Why are you doing this when you ought to be painting? What you should do is go back to the City and get on the Project." Well, I finally decided perhaps that's what I should do because I couldn't like what I was doing. I liked working with the kids, but we couldn't save any money because whatever we got paid on our day off we'd go to town and just blow it. We'd come back broke every time. We always thought maybe we could save a little money so we could go back to New York and get started. So when I got back to New York

IRVING SANDLER: Hold for one second. While you were up at Gloucester did you study with Hofmann?

JOHN OPPER: No, I never studied with Hofmann in Gloucester.

IRVING SANDLER: Well, when you came back to New York did you start in his classes?

JOHN OPPER: When I came back to New York I got on the Project.

IRVING SANDLER: Well, when you came from Gloucester to New York had you already known Hofmann?

JOHN OPPER: I had met him, yes, and known him. I also met Arthur Carles. He was a handsome – well, they both were nice-looking men. But Carles had a terrific beard that time, a very handsome man.

IRVING SANDLER: Was he up there?

JOHN OPPER: He had come up to visit Hofmann. And I also met Mercedes. She probably doesn't remember this. And what's his name, too - the young man who – oh Lillian Olinski was there was taking care of the school – who associated with – you know who I mean.

IRVING SANDLER: Holzman?

JOHN OPPER: Harry Holtzman! Yes. I met these people, had seen their work. But was quite confused by it.

IRVING SANDLER: So by 1934 you hadn't really been involved with modern ideas.

JOHN OPPER: No. I came in contact with modern ideas once I got on the Project.

IRVING SANDLER: I just wondered what happened in that period before you came to New York.

JOHN OPPER: I began to see modern things and look at them. When I came back to New York and right after I got the on the Project then I decided that I needed to study with somebody to make it a little clearer and understanding what I was doing. I did modern paintings, pseudo-modern paintings. A lot of people still do. Kind of transforming a Cubist style into realist painting. So I went up to see Hofmann. He had his school up on the 57 Street. He had already left the Art Students League and had set up his own school. And he wasn't doing so well. He only had a few good painting students and he had about a dozen people that he was interested in or who were interested in modern art and he let us work there very inexpensively. I don't remember how much I paid him for a month; it was very little compared with what he gave. I couldn't understand Hofmann very well at that time, but he was such a dynamic man you didn't have to understand him. Rapport just flowed from him. And he would come up and tell you he liked this or he didn't like this. But I think one of the most advantageous things for me was that I met artists there. That's where I met Byron Browne, Rosalind Bengelsdorf was there; George McNeil was working there. Mercedes Carles occasionally. Some worked steadily. Some came and went. And also Giorgio Cavallon would come up occasionally and work. And, ho, this sculptor that died---

IRVING SANDLER: Zogbaum?

JOHN OPPER: Zogbaum was there, too. So you see we had a very dynamic little group of artists there.

IRVING SANDLER: Fritz Bultman would have been there too? Was he there?

JOHN OPPER: No, he was in Germany. He wasn't with the – I met Bultman when I went to

Provincetown.

IRVING SANDLER: And what about – it may have been too early for him, too—Kamarowski? Was he there?

JOHN OPPER: I don't remember him.

IRVING SANDLER: What was Hofmann's teaching like?

JOHN OPPER: Very Free.

IRVING SANDLER: Was there any orientation to it that you remember?

JOHN OPPER: No. But there were still lifes set up all over the studio. His studio was a loft above the College Art. You know, the College Art was on the third floor at the Washington and 57th Street building. And we were above it. It was just a big loft. And Hofmann had a private little section. We came at hours when we could and we just painted. I don't remember any formal lectures at that time. I remember he would just come around occasionally and talk to you and I would get something of what he was saying. His Germanic speech was quite heavy at the time. But, as I said, it was just that you got the feeling of what he was after or the criticism he was making. And he was very encouraging. There were others there that had worked with him for quite a while that kind of taught there—criticized each other's work. The climate was very conducive for work. Then I think he moved in 1936 or 1937 to Eight Street – no, Ninth Street first.

IRVING SANDLER: That's right.

JOHN OPPER: He moved to Ninth Street and then his lessons became a little more formal. He had weekly criticism. And usually his criticism was open to anybody that wanted to come. And it became so popular that the studio would be packed. It was the studio of the painter, the old muralist Speichfield – was that the name? It was a marvelous studio way up on the top floor. That building is still there.

IRVING SANDLER: With a huge skylight?

JOHN OPPER: A huge skylight.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes, it's still there.

JOHN OPPER: Oh, it's a marvelous studio. You should see the place. And there's another little building in the driveway with another studio and the whole building was empty. I think Hofmann probably was living in one of the rooms on one of the floors. Then he had some other guy – I don't recall his name – that lived in the bottom studio and kind of took care of the building for him. Well, I did not work too long with Hofmann there.

IRVING SANDLER: Was he himself painting?

JOHN OPPER: Not really. He was making little sketches.

IRVING SANDLER: This would have been when?

JOHN OPPER: 1936. 1935 -1936. He was doing these little pen drawings. I think he began to paint a little later, in 1937 – 1938. But he always talked about painting. And one of the earliest paintings

that I remember of that Group George McNeil has. He has a beautiful portrait.

IRVING SANDLER: That's right. I've seen the portrait.

JOHN OPPER: That was about 1938. Hofmann began to paint the way he drew, his early drawings. His paintings looked very much like them.

IRVING SANDLER: It was free then?

JOHN OPPER: Very free. But you might say they were very linear. Later he broke away form that. I worked with Hofmann on Ninth street until I felt that I had reached the point where I had to work on my own, develop my own way. I understood what Cubism was about.

IRVING SANDLER: You had begun to talk a little bit about his criticism when he got a little more formal.

JOHN OPPER: We would have our work around the studio and Hofmann would do a general criticism. He'd talk about one painting or he might be talking about all the paintings. Really the quality that I think we get from Hofmann was his love and his respect for quality. You know you could see that the man just loved quality. Because there were some painters – we weren't all that completely abstract –some painters were working in a kind of expressionistic style. And he would point out the good qualities. And usually they would be good color relationships or design relationships.

IRVING SANDLER: When you said a minute ago that about the time you left him you felt you had pretty much gotten what you could get from him and then you implied that you had a fairly good command of Cubism.

JOHN OPPER: Well, I thought I understood it.

IRVING SANDLER: Would that have been the primary orientation of his teaching and what did he teach – Cubist drawing, Cubist design?

JOHN OPPER: No, he didn't. He taught more expressionistically. Now that I think about it, Hofmann really probably was the first abstract expressionist because he'd start talking about forces, tension, and pulls.

IRVING SANDLER: Push and pull in the Thirties?

JOHN OPPER: Yes, push pull. Later on he did some writing in German and somebody translated into English.

IRVING SANDLER: I think Lud Sander.

JOHN OPPER: I think that's where we got the push pull and tension idea. But he taught that way. He'd show you, he'd act out his feelings and his ideas. So it was more expressionistic. I wasn't the idea of overlapping planes or continuity of line according to another line or any of that basic Cubist idea. When I left Hofmann – I said Cubism; maybe it wasn't really Cubism – at that point I felt I had broken with realism, that I needed to work on my own, to develop my own sense of color.

IRVING SANDLER: And by that time, too, you would have become interested in European artists, modern artists?

JOHN OPPER: Oh, yes. While I was at the School I became very much interested in all the artists that you could see. Picasso, of course was the most obvious; Matisse, Miro. But usually reproductions. There weren't too many originals around. At least there weren't too many originals available. Even the Museum of Modern Art—well, the Museum didn't start until about 1937.

IRVING SANDLER: No, 1929.

JOHN OPPER: Well, they didn't have too many.

IRVING SANDLER: Then the Gallatin Collection was at N.Y.U.

JOHN OPPER: The Gallatin Collection is the one that was very influential. I saw the Gallatin Collection quite often. Well, there weren't too many Picassos—or Matisses—as I recall, in the Gallatin Collection.

IRVING SANDLER: No. While you were working with Hofmann were you working in an abstract vein or in a figurative vein?

JOHN OPPER: I worked from nature in an abstract way. I worked the way George worked. This painting was done about that time I was working with Hofmann. I liked it very much.

My paintings were—well, they were somewhat like that but more colorful and maybe more expressionistic or luscious color. And around that time I began to work in watercolor because it was very spontaneous and I could work very rapidly. And also I became aware of collage. These were things, you know, that were completely new to me. So actually I came on the scene in the thirties but as far as abstract art is concerned I only came on the scene in the later half—

IRVING SANDLER: Of the thirties.

JOHN OPPER: Yes.

IRVING SANDLER: Well, like many other of your contemporaries did.

JOHN OPPER: There were just a few that started. I think the only one that I really knew who knew he wanted to do abstract art at that time- well, there are two- were Albert Swinden and McNeil. Because McNeil started quite early. He started working at the Art Students League.

IRVING SANDLER: That's right. With Matulka.

JOHN OPPER: Yes. And then he went over to Hofmann. The others I think it's true had somewhat the same background as I did: started with representational background and began to began to go towards the abstract. Now I know in my case why I went from the representation to the abstract. Because the more I became aware of color and design the more I came in conflict with the object that I was painting. So it soon became a problem either I let the color go –and keep the composition as it should be, naturalistically or representationally, or I should take freedom with color and design. And that's when I became interested. I soon saw that the two were incompatible. So that's when I went to Hofmann and found that it was the same kind of experience that other artists were having, too. So I wasn't unique in one sense. And Giorgio Cavallon and I used to talk quite a bit. He was doing beautiful little watercolors at the time. Maybe he still has them. Very nice. But you could still see the image.

IRVING SANDLER: We've sort of moved from about 1934 to about 1937. No at the same time you

would have been on the Project?

JOHN OPPER: I was on the project in 1936.

IRVING SANDLER: Tell me a little about it. Because some of these things start coming together.

JOHN OPPER: I got on the Project for my representational paintings. I showed them a batch of paintings and watercolors. They liked them and they put me on the Easel Project.

IRVING SANDLER: Who was running the Easel—Let's see, was Diller the Mural Project?

JOHN OPPER: Diller was on the Mural Project. They had a man who was quite liberal in his ideas, but he wasn't a painter. I can't even recall his name.

IRVING SANDLER: Tell me a little about that situation, though, the situation on the Easel Project.

JOHN OPPER: Well, it was really almost heaven for me. And I think for the rest of the artists who were there. I was given all the paints that I need, all the brushes that I needed. All the materials were supplied. And my time of work was up to me. However, they had a kind of broad rule, I think was three weeks for a painting and two weeks for a watercolor. This was more or less an established policy. But on the Project I met other artists. Diller, you mentioned; I'd heard of Diller. I'd heard of Bolotowsky. I don't know if Bolotowsky was the Project but anyway I met him.

IRVING SANDLER: What about guys like Gorky? Or de Kooning?

JOHN OPPER: I never saw Gorky on the Project. I met Gorky once. I really didn't get to know Gorky. I saw him a few times at the Artists Union. They'd have meetings, you know. And there'd be grand sessions like The Club became later. But in the beginning the Artists Union did that. And that's where I met Gorky. Gorky would get up in a very dynamic way and he'd talk. He was a very attractive and interesting-looking man. He impressed me a lot so I went to see his paintings. You know, his paintings at that time were very much influenced by Picasso. But I liked his work. Let's see, the other abstract artists I met there –see when I joined the Artists Union in 1936 the Spanish War broke out. I was still kind of torn – you see I thought that something ought to be done and I wasn't quite sure about art being separate from the social life. So I wavered. I'm jumping right now because it was right after I joined the A.A.A. [American Abstract Artists]—the reason I dropped out was because I didn't feel I wanted to do completely abstract work. I began to do kind of semi abstract work. I remember doing several paintings of a kind of minor Guernica, you know, showing—one was an evacuation, people being bombed out of a town or something like that. And I was very much wrapped up with that and I felt very strongly about it.

IRVING SANDLER: But on the other hand, although you had this intention in mind, what was your attitude to the social realist painting?

JOHN OPPER: Oh, I didn't think they were doing anything. I thought they were just making social comments. They weren't creating art. What I tried to do was to see if it was possible to combine the two, you know, to do an artistic painting and still have an image. If my work at that time resembled anybody's—this was only a short period, about a year or a year and a half—it was more like a cross between Rivera and Orozco in a simplified form.

IRVING SANDLER: Then the Mexicans were important to you?

JOHN OPPER: Oh, yes. I was very much influenced by Orozco. More so than by Rivera.

IRVING SANDLER: He would have been very highly considered at the time?

JOHN OPPER: He was. He was considered a very good painter. I think he had come – around that time he came to New York to do the murals for the New School of Social Research.

IRVING SANDLER: Or was it the Rockefeller murals that he did around that time? I thought the murals for the School of social research might have been earlier. I don't remember now.

JOHN OPPER: I don't know. Maybe you're right, but I think it's the reverse.

IRVING SANDLER: Did you meet him then?

JOHN OPPER: I saw him.

IRVING SANDLER: Did you watch him working at all?

JOHN OPPER: No, I never was able to do that. Though, I did get to see some his sketches that he was working on—trying out. And the thing that impressed me a great deal was how much liberty he took on the wall, on the sketches. There was enough of a sketch on the wall but he changed it as he worked. Which impressed me because I immediately became conscious of the idea of color and size and scale while it was going on or being blown up. Because I'm sure that's what he did. Do you want to go into the A.A.A?

IRVING SANDLER: Well, yes, we can. I wanted to really go into all of this. But let's go into the A.A.A.?

JOHN OPPER: Why don't you ask me questions?

IRVING SANDLER: Fine. I'll get back to—

JOHN OPPER: I'll jump back.

IRVING SANDLER: No, that's one of the nice things about this kind of interviewing, you know. It doesn't have to be chronological. Tell me about the A.A.A.

JOHN OPPER: We don't have to have a chronological sequence here at all?

IRVING SANDLER: No, we'll get back to the other. Tell me about the A.A.A. How was that organized? And why?

JOHN OPPER: Why? It was quite simple. The reason why it was organized was that artists had no place to show. There were no galleries that were interested in abstract art, at least abstract art of the Americans. No museum would bother with them. If they did show anybody it would be an established name like Picasso or somebody similar to him. It was founded for the purpose of exhibiting. I think that the only function the A.A.A. really had was to exhibit abstract work and to get the public to see the abstract and to develop a little audience. I think the first meeting was held at Swinden's studio. I don't know who came around and told me about it—whether it was McNeil or somebody else. I think it might have been George. And I went to this meeting and Balcomb Greene was there and his wife.

IRVING SANDLER: Had you known them before?

JOHN OPPER: Yes, I had met Balcomb at the Artists Union. Earl Balcomb Greene was another very articulate guy. There'd be some marvelous discussions at the Artists Union. There was always this

combat between the social realists and the abstract artists. I remember Joe Jones. Do you remember him?

IRVING SANDLER: I just know—well, I've seen reproductions.

JOHN OPPER: He came to one of these meetings. Some guy got up in the back of the room and he said, "I come from the West. I have a message for you people. Art must help humanity" and so on. Later, I asked who it was and I found out it was Joe Jones. And also regionalism was very popular at the time.

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, yes, sure.

JOHN OPPER: And he said that "all you fellows in New York think you're the only scene in the world." Oh, getting back to Balcomb Greene, he was one of the first to argue that there is probably something in art besides the image that you show. He spoke very well. And, of course, Gorky would be another. And—well, Joe Solmon began to work in a kind of pseudo-modern way.

IRVING SANDLER: That's right. He was very, very early.

JOHN OPPER: You know, he did something then which reminds me of the Pop movement today. In his paintings he'd look for these signs, these unique image signs, you know, these strange…and he'd paint them. Only they were part of a scene.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

JOHN OPPER: But, you know, he'd paint a street full of these signs. It was a Pop art idea, showing the art of the street. I became very much interesting in the Artists Union. We found the *Art Front*, the magazine. And I think I was the first business manager. Which meant that it was my job to go out and get ads and to see that the thing got distribution. I was with them for about a year. I think Joe Solmon was the editor. Oh, and I also met Balcomb there. And I think Harry Holtzman might have been there.

IRVING SANDLER: I think so. Did you know John Graham then?

JOHN OPPER: No, I never got to know John Graham.

IRVING SANDLER: Because he wrote a couple of articles.

JOHN OPPER: John gram was living out –was he out in East Hampton then?

IRVING SANDLER: I don't know.

JOHN OPPER: No, I never met John Graham.

IRVING SANDLER: Well, you were starting about the A.A.A. and you said that the first meeting you attended Balcomb Greene was there and I guess the people you were with at Hofmann's—Browne, Bengelsdorf, McNeil.

JOHN OPPER: There were quite a number. There were others that I did not know. Werner Drewes, George L. K. Morris, I met Lassaw there. There were a couple of other sculptors. There was a young guy who was really good painter – Hananiah Harari. He painted in a kind of hieroglyphics. I keep associating some of these things because I associate his early works with some of the later

Gottliebs. He started playing with these little squared off hieroglyphics boxes. Let's see, who else? The Greenes were there. Anna Kohn. And there was that little—we used to call her Buddha. What was her name? Her husband designed the Eames chair—Charles Eames's wife.

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, yes! Fritz Bultman was telling me about her. What is her name now?

JOHN OPPER: She was a very interesting little girl. She looked like a little Buddha. And she was a terrific designer. She was one of the people there. Well, I think that book, the first book has the first membership.

IRVING SANDLER: Well, let's see, there was a sort of a small brochure-like thing in 1937. And then there was a book in 1938. And a book in 1939.

JOHN OPPER: The 1938 book I was in. I was in three shows. I was in the Squibb show, the Columbia show, and I think the one at the Riverside Museum. And then I dropped out of the group.

IRVING SANDLER: Because of this –you weren't sure about the non-objective?

JOHN OPPER: Well, it wasn't that I wasn't sure about the non-objective. I wasn't completely sure that we should forget what was going on in the world. Maybe man is obligated to do something about it. And there were other artist that felt strongly about it, but they felt that they could do something in other ways and not through their art.

[END OF TAPE 1 – SIDE 1]
[TAPE 1 – SIDE 2]

IRVING SANDLER: This is the second side of the first interview with John Opper. You have the 1939 catalogue—

JOHN OPPER: In front of me. Now the people that I remember here are Rosalind Bengelsdorf, Giorgio Cavellon.

IRVING SANDLER: Was he in here – Bolotowsky?

JOHN OPPER: Not at the beginning I don't think.

IRVING SANDLER: Browne would have been there.

JOHN OPPER: Byron Browne was there.

IRVING SANDLER: And Cavallon.

JOHN OPPER: Cavallon. Christie was there. And Anna Kohn. Drewes was there. Balcomb Greene was there. And Gertrude Greene. Harari. Carl Holty was there. And Harry Holtzman was there. Rae Kaiser. That's her name – the little girl we mentioned. Paul Kelpe was there. Leo Lances was there.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes, he was a Hofmann student, too.

JOHN OPPER: Yes, and Ibram Lassaw. George L. K. Morris was there. McNeil. Charles Shaw, I believe he was; I'm not certain about him. Albert Swinden was there. Turnbull was there. Whiteman was there. And Zogbaum Turnbull was there. I believe.

IRVING SANDLER: No, he was later, too.

JOHN OPPER: He came later. A lot of these people came later.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. Well, although the organization met initially to talk, John—

JOHN OPPER: to show

IRVING SANDLER: [Although it initially met to] to show, rather; it began to serve other functions, didn't it?

JOHN OPPER: Oh, yes, because one of the first things they discovered was that they had to put out some publication for people who were interested in what abstract was all about. And some of the people were even invited to speak. And they put out little brochures, and little articles were written trying to create an interest in American abstract art.

IRVING SANDLER: Rosalind Browne told me that there was some of these symposium that took place at the Artists Union and that she was once a speaker.

JOHN OPPER: Yes.

IRVING SANDLER: And Gorky was.

JOHN OPPER: Yes, they did that. They'd have the symposiums. And of course theyhad people from The Club, from the Abstract Artists speak. But I think what Rosalind is talking about maybe grew into that. But in the beginning our primary interest was just to show and get our work out. And we did get invited to different…there were a few traveling shows. I started to tell you I don't remember what happened to this little booklet but we all made a drawing on the same plate. And it was in a little book form. I never saw it again.

IRVING SANDLER: I saw a copy recently.

JOHN OPPER: And I don't know what happened to it.

IRVING SANDLER: I think Vytlacil—

JOHN OPPER: Vytlacil! It was his idea; that's right. Vytlacil was behind the idea. And I remember I did a figure, a kind of abstract figure for that.

IRVING SANDLER: But the members did meet; for a period of time they were meeting about once a week.

JOHN OPPER: We met quite often.

IRVING SANDLER: And I understand there were very heated discussions, you know, about abstract art among the members.

JOHN OPPER: Well, yes. We had what we now call the hard edge school and we had the more fluid, those that were later called the expressionists. I don't remember there being such terrible arguments. It was just discussing different points of view.

IRVING SANDLER: But most of the guys seem to have been working in a kind of geometric abstraction.

JOHN OPPER: Most of them were.

IRVING SANDLER: Why do you think that was the case?

JOHN OPPER: I don't know. I think the great influence at the time was probably Mondrian. You see there were two influences, I think. You had the Picasso influence and the Mondrian influence. And for some reason many of the members of the Club—I was going to say that there were more members that were purist in style. But that isn't quite true. In the beginning they were not; because, of the group that I named, I think, more than half were working in a more loose style: Rosalind Browne and Byron Browne and Cavallon.

IRVING SANDLER: The Hofmann people.

JOHN OPPER: The Hofmann group were working in a more or less freer style.

IRVING SANDLER: But when you look through, say, a catalogue like this about—

JOHN OPPER: This is the work two years later.

IRVING SANDLER: You know, geometric – well, hard edge.

JOHN OPPER: Yes.

IRVING SANDLER: And I was curious about why that should have been. You know, of all the directions that one could have taken why that should have been the one that was so dominant.

JOHN OPPER: well, I think maybe Diller had a great influence on this.

IRVING SANDLER: But Mondrian would have been very well-known and very—

JOHN OPPER: Mondrian's work was becoming know. Actually if you look back on it, it's kind of a mixed brew. There was Greene. There was Gertude Greene. There was Harry Holtzman. Oh, Holty was quite active and he was one of the people who spoke for more clarification of what art and shapes ought to be like.

IRVING SANDLER: It seemed to me, I guess, from what I've heard, the spokesmen would have been Holty, Greene and George L. K. Morris.

JOHN OPPER: That's true.

IRVING SANDLER: And the three of those guys worked with a very hard form then.

JOHN OPPER: Well, I'll tell you, maybe I'm wrong on this, but you could almost see two groups within the group: the rational painters, and what you might call the intuitive painters.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

JOHN OPPER: If you had any discussion the intuitive painters—its still the same argument—said that it lacks a warmth. On the other hand, the rational painters said that art should be very clearly defined. But I wasn't in the group when Reinhardt joined. Reinhardt in the beginning was not doing hard edge paintings.

IRVING SANDLER: Well, in the thirties he was. But very soon, around 1940 he softened up. But like the picture we have in our collection was geometric abstraction. I think probably he was influenced by Holty then. He was a student.

JOHN OPPER: I think Holty was a great influence.

IRVING SANDLER: I understand that one of the real problems in the organization was bringing in new members and there the whole problem of figuration versus abstraction—

JOHN OPPER: Yes, you are touching on a point there that I had forgotten. When a person was brought up for membership, that was when these different points of view came out. However, while I was there the policy was quite liberal in the sense that the work had to be non-representational but the manner of the work was left to the artist. We still did not want to freeze him in to any given school. The only point at the time was that the image was not there, at least not obvious.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. Or at least not that important. John, just to swing away while it's on my mind, this is to completely jump to another point: But when were we were talking aobut Hofmann how would you assess his role in the thirties' art. Like wat was his contribution as you saw it?

JOHN OPPER: Well—

IRVING SANDLER: First of all, to you. What did you personally get from the man?

JOHN OPPER: His belief in abstract art as a valid movement. He gave that impression. Well, I don't know whether he said it or somebody else said it at the time, but he always brought up the idea that art was very much—or that painting should be very much like nature in that it should exist on its own merits, on its own qualities. It's the kind of thing that Ad Reinhardt said later. Only with tongue in cheek.

IRVING SANDLER: And tied it up to complete purism.

JOHN OPPER: Yes. You know, it's very strange, in the thirties, I even remember Hofmann students getting together and talking about what a strong influence he was on making us aware of art being other than representational. And yet none of his students could get a break in there. It was a little too early. But, of course, in the forties they did. But this time, you see, one thing I found about—you as about the hard edge—it's easier to pass of a modern painting that is clean and neat than it is to show one that isn't. Even at that time I remember painters that worked with the image, the successful ones, also had a very neat and clean style. What was his name—

IRVING SANDLER: Speicher?

JOHN OPPER: No, no, I don't mean Speicher. He was working in a sort of abstract style—

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, Stuart Davis?

JOHN OPPER: No, Stuart Davis was quite abstract. And this fellow is kind of representational. Refregier. You know, anything that had a kind of romantic quality to where you blurred your edges wasn't quite as acceptable as – I used to call it the antiseptic school. You had to clean it up. And at that time I got to the point were I hated cleaned up things. Because they looked as though there were cleaned up. But I noticed these were things that were always mentioned.

IRVING SANDLER: Would the Bauhaus have been any particular influence?

JOHN OPPER: I don't think it was direct influence. Not while I was there. I think maybe later it became somewhat when Albers joined

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

JOHN OPPER: Hofmann never did join so far as I know

IRVING SANDLER: No, he never did.

JOHN OPPER: And some of the Bauhaus people did join.

IRVING SANDLER: Do you know why Hofmann didn't join the A.A.A.? Well, he wouldn't have been a painter until later.

JOHN OPPER: Well, I think simply maybe because painting the way Hofmann painted, or if you believe in the individual's intuition you're apt also to believe in being a loner and not being part of a group. I think maybe that's why Hofmann may not have joined because it was against his—I can't imagine seeing anybody who paints, say, say in a highly intuitive manner joining any group. It seems to me as I think back over history that those who start out with an idea or creed of some kind usually are not very intuitive artists.

IRVING SANDLER: No.

JOHN OPPER: The intuitive artists even shy away from—

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

JOHN OPPER: They're the kind that are always intellectualizing their work. After the fact sometimes.

IRVING SANDLER: George McNeil was always, you know, intuitive/

JOHN OPPER: But George always talked afterwards. I mean he never talked before; he didn't know who he painted it. See, he painted it and then maybe later on he would try to rationalize what he did. I've heard George say that of course, the painting is always the same.

IRVING SANDLER: Another thing: and this is again to get back to a point I wanted to ask before. You said that in 1934 Carles came up to Gloucester to visit Hofmann. They were friends, then?

JOHN OPPER: Oh, yes, as far as I know they'd been friends for a long time. When I first met Mercedes Carles I saw her at Gloucester and I saw her father, too. And, oh, this is interesting. I remember once sitting with Hofmann. We were just sitting there talking, or rather he was talking and I was listing, and he was talking about some European artists. And he mentioned Carles and that he was probably the greatest American artist.

IRVING SANDLER: Really!

JOHN OPPER: and at the time – maybe he thought it later, too, he said that in his estimation he was probably one of the greatest artist, probably one most ignored. I know he had a great admiration for his work. How long they were friends I don't know. But I know I saw them together. I saw them again in 1934.

IRVING SANDLER: That's interesting. I knew that Mercedes had studied with Hofmann but I didn't know that Hofmann also knew Carles.

JOHN OPPER: He always spoke very highly of Arthur Carles.

IRVING SANDLER: While you were up in Gloucester did you run into Avery?

JOHN OPPER: Oh, yes, sure. I have a wonderful story about Avery and his wife. When I went up there – Estelle happened to be there – went like a novice, you know. I had my body of paints. And I decided I couldn't paint on canvas so I had a lot of boards. And I was just loaded down when I got off the bus. And there was a man and a woman standing there and they just laughed and laughed. And it turned out that it was Milton and Sally Avery. They had a car and they took me to where I wanted to get off. And also at that time he had – not classes- a group that met at Milton Avery's studio to draw from the figure.

IRVING SANDLER: Was that up there?

JOHN OPPER: This was in New York. It was the same period I belonged to the A.A.A. See, I was still drawing from the figure, but not in the old representational way. But we all chipped in and got a model and we met in Avery's studio.

IRVING SANDLER: Who were the people, do you remember?

JOHN OPPER: Oh, yes. Gottlieb was there. And Rothko.

IRVING SANDLER: Was Joe Solmon there?

JOHN OPPER: Joe Solmon was there. There usually were about half a dozen.

IRVING SANDLER: Was Newman around at the time, too?

JOHN OPPER: I didn't see him there.

IRVING SANDLER: What was that like? Do you remember what might have been talked about at Avery's?

JOHN OPPER: We discussed politics a lot. But Avery never would. He talked about a lot of things but never about politics.

IRVING SANDLER: But of that group he would have been the older artist that people all looked up to?

JOHN OPPER: He was the one that we all respected. We respected him. And I remember we had a great deal of respect for Stuart Davis, too. And there was among the more representational—well, he really wasn't representational-I was thinking of Max Weber.

In the thirties there was another group that formed, a social group, more political than artistic. That was the American Artists Congress. I remember joining with them for a couple of shows. That's were Max Weber came in. He was a strong moving force there. And, strangely enough, Stuart Davis, too.

IRVING SANDLER: He was the president. Do you have the book that the Artists Congress put out? I have a copy of it. They had hundreds of names in the call and yours was one. And Stuart Davis was the president.

JOHN OPPER: That's right. Max Weber was an officer too.

IRVING SANDLER: I forget now, but he made one of the speeches.

JOHN OPPER: the American Artists Congress was made up of all kinds of artists; they had abstract artists, social realists, regionalists.

IRVING SANDLER: Well, the full name was The American Artists Congress Against War and Fascism.

JOHN OPPER: I guess that was it. That's when I started the semi-abstract anti-war things.

IRVING SANDLER: But I didn't know that Avery actual had this—

JOHN OPPER: Avery showed with the group, I think. But he wouldn't have anything to say.

IRVING SANDLER: No, I was going to say I didn't know that he had the situation where you guys go together at his studio with a mode.

JOHN OPPER: Oh, yes. I don't know how long it lasted. But that's when I first met Rothko and Gottlieb and, oh, Sokole also. As a matter of fact, I shared a studio with him so we went together. But there were about a half-dozen of us – Joe Solmon that you mentioned, Soyer—

IRVING SANDLER: Later they formed a group called "The Ten". Avery wasn't part of that?

JOHN OPPER: I don't remember that. You mean with Rothko and—

IRVING SANDLER: Rothko, Gottlieb, Solmon was in it; Schanker was also in it.

JOHN OPPER: Oh, yes, Louis Schanker was up there at the drawing class.

IRVING SANDLER: Let's see---then there was a fellow by the name of Koufelt. A fellow by the name of Harris.

JOHN OPPER: Lou Harris. I remember him.

IRVING SANDLER: Let's see. For a period of time Tschacbasov was in that group.

JOHN OPPER: Oh, yes.

IRVING SANDLER: And Ben-Zion.

JOHN OPPER: Ben-Zion I think came up to the drawing group once or twice.

IRVING SANDLER: A curious thing you knowing Avery because you had mentioned before that one of the first modern artists that really grabbed you was Matisse. What was Hofmann's attitude to Matisse?

JOHN OPPER: He thought he was probably the greatest painter then, this maybe in the early thirties.

IRVING SANDLER: Even preferred him over Picasso?

JOHN OPPER: He said he was the greatest natural painter.

IRVING SANDLER: And did Avery ever have anything to say about Matisse?

JOHN OPPER: He never said much about him, no. I don't remember Avery making any remark about him. But it's quite evident in his work.

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, sure. To me it's interesting that the influence of Matisse really, except for Avery, doesn't seem to have been that strong in the thirties. For instance, if you look through the catalogue of the A.A.A., you see guys working after Mondrian, after Picasso, after Miro, but not after Matisse.

JOHN OPPER: my own personal feeling about this is that it's much harder to follow a man like Matisse and come off with something than it is to follow some of the others where you have, you know, the structure of the canvas, the form, hard lines. But, you know, when your color has to function, and your shape has to function it isn't that simple. I think maybe that's one of the reasons why…Now, I mentioned Matisse. I did a whole group of water colors that I think were very much Matisse influenced although they look a little bit like Turner, too; they're kind of a cross in between. But it was this search for color and form.

IRVING SANDLER: While we're on this point, of the Europeans, or of the influences that were floating around in the thirties, say, in this period before you left the A.A.A., which would have been the most important to you? I mean what artists were you most interested in—?

JOHN OPPER: In the A.A.A.?

IRVING SANDLER: While you were just out of Hofmann and involved, say, this would have been around 1937, 1938?

JOHN OPPER: Are you speaking of American artists or just artist in general?

IRVING SANDLER: Artists in general. I mean thinking of your work then.

JOHN OPPER: Do you want to turn the tape off? I want to show you an early painting that I did. I did a few paintings that were very strongly of Matisse quality. And there's another artist who influenced me a great deal around the time, and that's Cezanne. And John Marin. I came to Marin through Cezanne, you see. But I was interested in Matisse more than I think I was in Picasso. I always considered him a greater painter. I still do. And again getting back to why there were more people painting in other ways rather than Matisse, I think he was too difficult; he was so simple and that's why it's so hard. I don't think you can come off with it. It just didn't come off; that's all. That always amazed me about Matisse's work. It's so easy to look at; yet you can't do it. But I can imitate others. I don't know whether that's true or not.

IRVING SANDLER: No, I believe it. I think so.

JOHN OPPER: When I was in London this past summer – I suppose you saw that show, too.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

JOHN OPPER: What was the name of it?

IRVING SANDLER: The New Museum.

JOHN OPPER: The New Museum. Well, the thing that amazes me is that his collages are so simply done you wonder what the heck it is that makes the thing so great. And even if he didn't do it himself he told somebody to put id own there-but-the whole look of the thing I don't know, he just

had it.

IRVING SANDLER: I guess you probably would have been attracted to Avery's work then, too?

JOHN OPPER: I was very much attracted. Avery influenced me too. As I say, for a while I did watercolors. And I had one or two watercolors that could easily be traced to Avery's influence. I don't think I was conscious of it at the time. But I have seen paintings of Avery's later that I was sure were an influence on me. I remember doing a tree in a field. It was a very simple mass and the apples were just little red dots spotted- it was almost like a pattern design. Which might have been Avery, might have been Matisse. It was kind of both. It was only a tree in silhouette, the apples were drawn just red balls.

IRVING SANDLER: Did Hofmann have much interest in or did he have very much to say about guys like Kandisnsky?

JOHN OPPER: No. He didn't speak much of Kandisky. He did about Mondrian. He thought Mondrian was one for the best artists of the time for relationships of color and form, his illusion of tension, what he called tension, movement in the picture. Yes, he talked about Mondrian a lot. I don't know about Kandinsky.

IRVING SANDLER: Did he talk much about Miro?

JOHN OPPER: He like Miro.

IRVING SANDLER: So your predilection would really have been for the colorists?

JOHN OPPER: Yes. You see, I've always – in a sense I think I've never gotten away from painting. And to me painting is color. I think one of the reasons why I never spent too much time working in three dimensions is that color is so important.

IRVING SANDLER: You mean why you didn't work with, say, modeling?

JOHN OPPER: Modeling, say, three dimensions. Of course, no they're doing it but it's still not the same thing. Later, I liked Rothko's work quite a bit. There, too, I think it was his color—I've always been impressed with color. Well, it's a combination: color and shape. But the precise canvas never really excited me.

IRVING SANDLER: In other words, the idea of color making form?

JOHN OPPER: Yes, the idea of color making the form; the idea of the color and shape moving, really moving, creating other qualities, other feelings.

IRVING SANDLER: John, although you left the A.A.A. around 1938 how would you assess the role of the organization? What role did it play in American art? What did it do?

JOHN OPPER: I think it had a very important role at the beginning. I think the importance was that in the beginning it got abstract art out and people began to see it. Of course then the war came along. And it's hard to say…Then a lot of the contemporary modern European artists come to this country and I think they made a strong impression. Their work was being shown. If you were to say, do you think that if the A.A.A. had never existed would abstract art have been left behind, you know?

IRVING SANDLER: Well, alright.

JOHN OPPER: I'm not so sure it would have. You know, I think the temper of the time after the war. And everybody was seeking for new – well, we knew that art was not concerned with imagery.

IRVING SANDLER: But the A.A.A. would have played some role in getting that idea accepted?

JOHN OPPER: Well, I think perhaps it did. And perhaps it was just that right after the war they were looking for other things to show. You know, I'm going to sound very skeptical about this. But, I don't know whether it was only on a smaller scale than what we have today. Getting something different to show. It might have been.

IRVING SANDLER: Why did the organization decline?

JOHN OPPER: Well, the A.A.A. really I think today has last its function. The reason it was founded was because nobody was showing abstract art. That isn't true any more. So I don't see it except as a club, a kind of a group to get together. But many of the people I know that are still in the A.A.A. just do it as another means of exhibiting. But they don't need it any more. Then we need it. We didn't have any place. You know, it's kind of being faithful to an original idea.

IRVING SANDLER: So you're suggesting that once it became possible to show, then the organization really didn't have any purpose anymore?

JOHN OPPER: Its original purpose was a little watered down I think. Yes.

IRVING SANDLER: Other members of the organization told me that the thing about the organization that was so important was the fact that guys came around and sat around and talked. But you suggest that to you that wasn't important to the group?

JOHN OPPER: No, not so much. Because I tended to shy away from – I still do – from setting up creeds for what your work ought to be. Perhaps that's what I like about –and why I always keep going back to Matisse. Because I think his development was out of a man's work. It was a kind of thing that came from, you know, we use the word "soul" today.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

JOHN OPPER: He was a soul painter. And I think I tend to go in that direction.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

JOHN OPPER: Now don't misunderstand. I'm not saying that there aren't men who work in a more rational way than I do. There are. But I don't think you can start out as a group. I don't think you can start an association. I think it's done by individuals, or two or three people.

IRVING SANDLER: It's interesting that the guys that you would have been close to who were members of the group had pretty much the same outlook. They were kind of the loners even within the group. Like McNeil.

JOHN OPPER: McNeil was a loner. Cavallon was a loner. Well, even Ad Reinhardt was a loner. But Ad Reinhardt became very articulate later.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

JOHN OPPER: And that kind of helped. You know, I'm not say this to put anybody down. But it certainly helped to draw attention to the man's work. And the fact that Ad did these cartoons, you know, the satirical cartoons and letter that he wrote. You couldn't ignore him.

IRVING SANDLER: No.

JOHN OPPER: But, you see, most of the artists that we were talking about—Well, I mean Avery was a loner. And in a way, I think, Rothko was a loner.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

JOHN OPPER: Of course the younger generation maybe they're still the loners. But the artists that seem to be attracted to of my generation are—

IRVING SANDLER: John, I just want to ask a question to get my own bearings in terms of your career: when did you leave New York?

JOHN OPPER: Oh, I left New York in about 1945.

IRVING SANDLER: And does that mean that you were in New York up to 1945?

JOHN OPPER: Yes. When the war came along for three years – for two of those three years I was working with a ship design company making plan drawings for the piping systems that went into PT boats.

IRVING SANDLER: But you would still have been painting?

JOHN OPPER: Somewhat; not much. I could say that for about three years I didn't do very much real painting. In 1945 I left New York. I had gotten my first job at Women's College. And then I began to paint. And I began to paint purely abstract. You know, it's a funny thing that happens in art movements. It seems to me that the climate – the time kind of dictates the kind of work that's going to be done. Because here I was away from New York painting very much like the New York painters. I remember when I did get a show in New York the critics called me a member of the New York School. I suppose the work was like that they were doing. But I was outside of New York. I had no actual contact with these people. I saw reproductions I suppose.

IRVING SANDLER: There couldn't have been many reproductions then.

JOHN OPPER: No. But my feelings, my knowledge, my empathies were very similar to—

IRVING SANDLER: Again just sort of to –You left Hofmann and then you left the A.A.A. group, and then you work I guess became more imagistic. How long would that have been? You said about a year?

JOHN OPPER: Just about a year or a year-and-a-half; maybe two years.

IRVING SANDLER: That would be what from 194-?

JOHN OPPER: You see, it went from the social, from the semi-abstract realism.

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, you did go to realism?

JOHN OPPER: Well, it wasn't realist but more recognizable. It never was realist.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

JOHN OPPER: To a Matisse-like type of painting. I must have had three or four portraits that I did.

IRVING SANDLER: That would have been when – around the early forties.

JOHN OPPER: Yes. Oh, Harry Bowden is another guy. Was he a member of the A.A.A.?

IRVING SANDLER: Yes, I think so.

JOHN OPPER: He was a very good painter. What made me think of him was he was the only guy that I know who was Matisee-influenced.

IRVING SANDLER: I wonder if he was in this show in 1939. Yes, there's his name: Harry Bowden. I wonder if they reproduced him in this book, the black and white.

JOHN OPPER: Sure.

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, gosh, yes. It's sort of a little more expressionist.

JOHN OPPER: It's more expressionist. But his color and his shape recall Matisse much more than any of the painters that I knew.

IRVING SANDLER: Was he also a Hofmann student?

JOHN OPPER: At one time he had been with Hofmann, I think. Now how long he had been there, I don't know. He never was there when I was there.

IRVING SANDLER: It looks like pretty early. Probably studied with him at the Art School. And it says later Hans Hofmann School of Fine Art.

JOHN OPPER: See it was called the Hans Hofmann School of Fine Art when it was on Eight Street.

IRVING SANDLER: I see.

JOHN OPPER: But maybe on Ninth Street—What's her name was there, too, at the time—Lee Krasner started with Hofman on Ninth Street. She started to work with Hofmann on Ninth Street.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. You didn't know Pollock?

JOHN OPPER: I met Pollock in the thirties through his brother. At the time I met him he was still painting like Benton.

IRVING SANDLER: Do you remember what date that would have been?

JOHN OPPER: Yes, 1938.

IRVING SANDLER: Then in 1938 he was still working in a Benton style? Because, you know, there's some—

JOHN OPPER: At the time, he was shy. I met him through his brother.

IRVING SANDLER: This was Sanford?

JOHN OPPER: Yes, it was Sanford. I don't know Charles. Charles I understand moved into my building. It was Sanford. I guess he was older, wasn't he? Pollock was younger. He was very nice and so was his wife. One time I was at Sanford Pollock's house and Jackson came around. He didn't say much. He was quiet, very reserved.

IRVING SANDLER: Had you met de Kooning yet?

JOHN OPPER: I don't know as I met de Koonng until later. De Kooing, too, was a loner.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. Very much so.

JOHN OPPER: He never joined the group, did he?

IRVING SANDLER: No.

JOHN OPPER: And Gorky is another one.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. When you left New York, John, because we're really jumping ahead now, it was in 1945. How long did you stay away from New York?

JOHN OPPER: Well, the total time I stayed away was four years.

IRVING SANDLER: So you were away from 1945 to 1949?

JOHN OPPER: Yes. I was here from 1949 to 1952. Then I was gone again from 1952 to 1957. I've always felt that I left when the artists of my generation were—I should have been on the scene here because, you know, things were really happening here. But I was painting elsewhere.

IRVING SANDLER: When you came back in 1949 did you become a member of The Club?

JOHN OPPER: No. I came back and I was working on my own. I was a loner. I taught at Columbia and worked on my doctorate and I did this rather than exhibiting. I did go up to see Charlie Egan. He was just starting his gallery then.

IRVING SANDLER: No, it would have been earlier. Let's see, I think Egan started his gallery around – well, de Kooning has his first show there in 1948. So the gallery started about 1947.

JOHN OPPER: Well, I went to see him and he was interested. I knew Charlie from the Ferargil Gallery. You know he had been with them?

IRVING SANDLER: Yes, he worked for them.

JOHN OPPER: So, he told me that he was interested and to bring my work around. But I never did. I only came back to see Charlie, I guess it was 1954. And he gave me a show. And right after that show he folded up. He closed the Gallery. I think I was the last one to show at the Egan Gallery.

IRVING SANDLER: What I was trying to establish in my own mind was what your career was, or where you were, because all of these things we want to go into some depth.

JOHN OPPER: Yes. My career away from New York. See I continued very much with painting. And as I said before, I was doing paintings that were very much like what was being done here. Of course then, being away from New York, the problem I had was that I couldn't exhibit. You know, like the A.A.A.

IRVING SANDLER: That's right. Well, where were you from 1945 to 1949, John?

JOHN OPPER: For a year I was at Women's College at the University of North Carolina. And then I went to the University of Wyoming as a guest artist for the summer. And I stayed for two-and-a-half years. It's an interesting story. I continued as a painter. The head of the department came back East to work on his doctorate, so I was made acting head. And while I was acting head the dean had a son and he wanted me to hire him. I wouldn't and the upshot of it was the President called me in and said that my contract would not be renewed at University because my work was too modern for Wyoming. And I was furious. I had made a lot of friends and everything. Are you interested in this.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. Go ahead.

JOHN OPPER: And I mentioned to one fellow that the statement was made that my work was too modern for Wyoming. This guy happened to be – he acted as a reporter for Time magazine.

He said, "Are you going to take it?" I said, "No, I don't think so. I think Wyoming is just as capable of taking modern art as any other state." He said, "May I quote you on that?"
I said, "Yes." The next morning I saw a headline in the local paper, "Wyoming can't understand modern art," or something like that. Oh, my God, the whole board started crying whose statement is this? Everyone was up in arms. Not because they were defending modern art. They were angry as hell that they were put down as not being capable of understanding this modern art.

IRVING SANDLER: Well, what happened?

JOHN OPPER: I was maintained. And the president asked me to retract it. And I said I wouldn't retract it; there was nothing to retract. I said if you wish to say that the problem has been alleviated it's ok with me. Well, shortly after that I need another person there. McNeil was looking for a job, so I asked him to come out. And he came. And the Fellow that had been head of the department took a job in Alabama and he asked me if I'd go to Alabama. And I said Alabama is closer to New York than Wyoming is so I'll go to Alabama. So I left. And I stayed for a bout a year in Alabama and then in 1949 I came up north.

IRVING SANDLER: And went to Columbia?

JOHN OPPER: And went to Columbia. I was there for about two-and-a-half years. And after I got my doctor's degree I couldn't get a job. The only job I had was the same job everybody had: George's part time work for all four of us at Pratt, you know. And I had two babies and no source of income. Then this fellow down at Women's College offered me a job again. So like a fool I took it. I say "like a fool" because I think I kind of regretted leaving the first time but I certainly should not have gone the second time.

IRVING SANDLER: Do you think it's valuable for an artist to be in New York?

JOHN OPPER: Yes, because an artist has to show. He has to show and he has to have others see his work. You know the thing that I found – there's always a tendency for – he may be working in a certain way. I know I did. And then I'd pick up Art News and somebody would be having a show and they'd say, "for the first time this guy is doing this kind of work." And I was through. I didn't influence him but I'm sure there were other people that had been working that way, but the first guy that shows, the first guy that gets into print, is the guy that gets the credit.

IRVING SANDLER: That's right. They style is identified with him.

JOHN OPPER: And then, too, I missed the companionship of the artists; I missed the discussions, I used to come quite often to The Club, and I missed talking with the members. And my work wouldn't be shown. And I would get careless with it. I just stuck it away. I regret not having saved some of it.

IRVING SANDLER: John, we're sort of right at the beginning of a new point in the chronology. There are still a lot of things about the thirties that we still have to cover. So what I would like to do in the next session is pick up with the Project, and the Union, the Congress and *Art Front*, and kind of work up again—

JOHN OPPER: Okay.

IRVING SANDLER: And then another thing we have to do is pick your own work up from around 1938, go over it a little bit more after you left Hofmann, left the American Abstract Artists, and what happened from 1945 – on, because you said that from about 1942 to 1945 you weren't working much.

JOHN OPPER: No, not too much.

IRVING SANDLER: A lot of guys in this period we want to talk about but now, this is the end of the second side of the first inter with John Opper.

[END OF TAPE 1 – SIDE 2]
[TAPE 2 – SIDE 1]

[Tape recording of an interview with John Opper on October 15, 1968.]

IRVING SANDLER: This is the second interview with John Opper, October 15th, 1968. John, there are a couple of things that we really didn't go over too much last time. The Artists Union and also *Art Front*. You said you were on the editorial board of Art Front.

JOHN OPPER: I wasn't really on the editorial board – except indirectly- I was the business manager when it was first formed. At the time the editor was Joe Solmon. I don't remember—I think maybe Balcomb Greene was the editor before him. And then Joe Solmon came in. Or maybe it was the reverse. I don't' recall which way it was.

IRVING SANDLER: Well, both Joe Solmon and Balcomb Greene were—

JOHN OPPER: They edited the magazine.

IRVING SANDLER: --but they were both very sympathetic to modern French painting.

JOHN OPPER: Yes. Joe Solmon's work at that time, if I recall correctly—and I guess I mentioned this last time—he was very much interested in what later became Pop Art, in signs, homemade signs, really, that were found on the East Side. These appeared in many of his paintings. In fact he'd do a streak of them. There'd be very few people sometimes, just a row of signs. These almost in a way reminded me of Pennsylvania Dutch painted barns. And Balcomb Greene was doing very hard [edge] abstract paintings at the time.

IRVING SANDLER: That's right. Quasi-geometric abstractions.

JOHN OPPER: Yes.

IRVING SANDLER: And he was a member of A.A.A.

JOHN OPPER: Yes. And, if anything, I would say he was very much influenced by Arp; at least Gertrude Greene was, and she in turn influenced Balcomb. She used to do these cutout abstractions.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes, the reliefs. Well, this is something that I'm sort of curious about because then *Art Front* wouldn't have been kind of a straight social realist thing?

JOHN OPPER: Oh, no. *Art Front* had a kind of aesthetic program.

IRVING SANDLER: It did?

JOHN OPPER: It did, yes. They had articles on art. And there'd be guys like – oh Balcom Greene – I'm sure he was aware of the social scene but he never wrote about it as far as I can recall. He discussed the place of art in society. And so did Joe, as a matter of fact. It wasn't in any way revolutionary as a promotive magazine.

IRVING SANDLER: Except for Union activities?

JOHN OPPER: And the Union activities only as they involved the WPA. It was just trying to get certain conditions cleared up for people on the Project. But there, too, much of the Union – it was very much like being in a club. There would be speakers on certain nights. I remember all kinds of people and they would have symposiums, two or three people at one time; although we didn't call them symposiums then.

IRVING SANDLER: Of different aesthetic positions?

JOHN OPPER: Of different aesthetic positions, yes. You'd have the realists sometimes. Well, it always got into an argument in these meetings because the Union was made up of many, many artists, most of whom, worked, I would say, representationally. But there were a good percentage of the artists who did work into the abstract idiom. And there would always be this debate, whether art was concerned with art or whether art was concerned with social change. And of course around that time you had an additional factor of the civil war in Spain. This troubled many artists. And there were artists who worked very abstractly who were very much upset by the war in Spain. My first experience with abstract art was through the Artists Union. Which is strange. Because, you see, I came from the Midwest. And I had seen one or two abstract paintings but I didn't know what they were all about. To me they were just simple design problems. And this first show that I went to in Pittsburgh, the Carnegie International I saw these contemporary French artists, it was very puzzling. The whole point I'm making is that it was at the Union that I became conscious of a completely new world of art; of people who thought that art was important in its own right, not as a means for expressing other ideas.

IRVING SANDLER: Would this have been partly in the symposiums?

JOHN OPPER: In the symposiums and through meeting individual artists. But it might have begun with the symposiums. I never really thought much about it. But I'd hear them talking there. The first time I ever met Gorky was at the Artists Union. I had never even heard of Gorky. This was in 1936. Gorky had been on the scene quite a while.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes, he had.

JOHN OPPER: I had never heard of the guy. And I saw this big, strong-looking man with a tremendous black mustache; he was very handsome-looking guy. And, you know, he talked with so much authority that you'd have to sit up and listen to him. Then there was another guy, a friend of Gorky's – I don't know whether he was a friend of his or not. I can't remember his name, who also was a painter who I became friends with. I remember he was a great mimic and he would do a takeoff of Gorky. And he sounded just like Gorky. I remember that at the time Gorky was always involved with the importance of the French abstract painters. Especially Picasso.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

JOHN OPPER: And this happened at Union meetings. And out that after meeting others—

IRVING SANDLER: Did Gorky lecture? Or was he sort of talking from the floor?

JOHN OPPER: I don't think he lectured. I think he just spoke from the floor. I don't recall Gorky ever actually giving a lecture. As a matter of fact, most of the interesting discussing came up in the discussion period. People would – like Gorky would get up and say something. Or Balcomb Greene. And there was Joe Jones on the other side. He would present his position. And there was a very interesting exchange of ideas. There were the social realists who believed in our day, that is at that time, that the function of art was to dramatize the problems of the time.

IRVING SANDLER: Sure.

JOHN OPPER: And it really bugged me very much because I was torn—I wanted to be a purist, while at the same time I was very much aware of the social scene. And I knew several artists that I liked that I had met through the magazine – what was his name? – Paul Block who was in some way connected with the *Art Front* and was a very politically-minded guy. He went to Spain and was only there a few months when he was killed. Really it was a very exciting time.

IRVING SANDLER: Who were some of the other people? Rosenberg was on *Art Front*.

JOHN OPPER: Harold Rosenberg, you mean?

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

JOHN OPPER: Yes, he wrote for it. See, the *Art Front* was open not only to artists but also to people on the Writers Project. So these non-artists would write articles and they were usually published.

IRVING SANDLER: Harold indicated that there was quite a bit—that some of the position in the magazine were taken on political grounds and that there were always political factions trying to take it over?

JOHN OPPER: I think basically that's true. Because after all the whole idea, the whole Union was formed for the purpose of solving a social need which had political implications. So most of the artists in the Union were politically-minded. And Rosenberg did belong to—at that time I remember too there were quite a number (since you brought up the factions idea) were supposed to be Red, and some were supposed to be Trotskyites. This was all going on at the same time. And I couldn't really tell the difference between them as far as their work was concerned. Politically there were different; whenever they got together there was quite a battle. But you couldn't tell by looking at their paintings. And there were painters who painted very abstractly who were very, very politically and socially-minded.

IRVING SANDLER: Stu Davis would be one.

JOHN OPPER: Stuart Davis would be one. See around that time I became so interested in the idea of art as a means in its own right and in abstract that I joined Hans Hofmann's class. And there's where I met McNeil, for example.

IRVING SANDLER: He wrote some articles for *Art Front*.

JOHN OPPER: I don't remember whether he did or not. But as long as I've known George McNeil his work has been very abstract. Well, that's a 1936 painting right there. I think I showed you that.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

JOHN OPPER: He's always been very abstract. And he was very socially-conscious guy. And then there was another one who worked abstractly – Byron Browne. Although Byron Browne and George to a great degree kept to themselves a lot.

IRVING SANDLER: Do you remember any of the other people who were around at the magazine?

JOHN OPPER: At the Union?

IRVING SANDLER: At the Union and the magazine. There was a guy, if my memory is correct – Vaselick.

JOHN OPPER: Yes. Louis Vaselick.

IRVING SANDLER: Right. I'm just trying to think of…I once read through the entire magazine.

JOHN OPPER: And there used to be a writer – I can't think of his name – he was not an artist. He was a small guy. And he was very active there.

IRVING SANDLER: Did you know Davis at this time?

JOHN OPPER: Well, not personally. I only got to know Davis through the Artists Congress and I never was really very close to him. As far as I know, I don't think he ever was a member of the Artist Union. His affiliation with most of the artists—he was President of the American Artists congress. And that's where I met him. Milton Avery, too, I don't believe belonged to the Union (I'm not sure about that), but he also was a member of the Congress. Max Weber was a member of Congress.

IRVING SANDLER: Before we get into Congress – because that's something I want to talk to you about – there were certain modern French painters that seem to have been featured rather more than one than others in *Art Front* – like Warsal was one. Why was that? I'm always curious about that.

JOHN OPPER: I really don't know.

IRVING SANDLER: And Leger. Leger wrote several articles, or they were translated.

JOHN OPPER: Well, I don't know if he wrote—

IRVING SANDLER: Did you meet him when he was in America?

JOHN OPPER: Leger? I saw him once. He was very impressive man. I never met Mondrian,

unfortunately. Oh, Harry Holtzman I knew. I don't know whether he ever wrote for *Art Front* or not.

IRVING SANDLER: I don't think so. I don't remember any articles. What about the Mexicans? How were they considered?

JOHN OPPER: Oh, the Mexican artists at the time? The very revolutionary artists were quite—

IRVING SANDLER: You mean like Siqueiros?

JOHN OPPER: Siqueiros – Orozco was a very quite man – but Siqueiros was quite the opposite. He was very aggressive. I remember he came up and spoke once. And his talk had nothing to do with politics; but with the use of the new materials.

IRVING SANDLER: Duco?

JOHN OPPER: Yes. Artist ought to be working with materials of our time. No brushes. Throw away your brushes. Use a gun. And he also was one of the first to – he said, "Use any method." By the way, he even suggested brick with sticks. Anything. The brush is outmoded. The only time I saw Orozco was when he was working on the mural at the New School for Social Research. I went up there one day with, I guess, a couple of other artists. And the very interesting thing about Orozco was that he had a whole bunch of sketches on the floor around him, studies that he had made for the mural. And he was working on the wall and he didn't even glance at his sketches. It was so much a part of his thinking that he didn't have to. And of course the final drawing and painting on the wall was a composite of all the sketches that he made.

IRVING SANDLER: What about Rivera?

JOHN OPPER: I never met Rivera.

IRVING SANDLER: How was this thing? Because Siqueiros actually set up a workshop in New York. Did you ever have anything—?

JOHN OPPER: I didn't have much to do with it. But I remember artists did work with him. I never did work with him.

IRVING SANDLER: How were his ideas received?

JOHN OPPER: Well, Siqueiros represented a – you mentioned a revolutionary group.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

JOHN OPPER: He was the outstanding – he more so than Rivera. Even at that time though I think the most respecting artists among the artists that I knew – and I always thought they were the more penetrating artists – was Orozco. Rivera was next probably. I believe at the time the murals at Rockefeller Center were taken down or destroyed or something. And that created quite a stir. But I wasn't involved.

IRVING SANDLER: But Siqueiros' idea, you know, were discussed? I mean the new techniques.

JOHN OPPER: They were. He constantly spoke of new techniques, of new was of painting. You see, at that time I was working at Hofmann's school and became interceded in –what shall I say? – the formal aspects of painting. Siqueiros was more interested in the subject matter and the new

textural means of accomplishing your expression. So, I wasn't too interested in him. So, I was more interested in this new world that I had discovered in abstract art, you know, and the artist that I had met. I started in 1936. In about 1937 the A.A.A. was founded. So I worked along those lines. However, at the time I wasn't a pure abstractionist in the sense that McNeil was. Or Balcomb Greene or Ibram Lassaw. They were all working very abstractly.

IRVING SANDLER: But you do indicate that, say, the scene in the Artists Union was far more open than many people today realize? And on *Art Front*?

JOHN OPPER: Well, maybe it's because I got to meet both sides and maybe it's because of the fact that I was interested in the aesthetic end of it.

IRVING SANDLER: But I mean abstract artists who had an article weren't cut out because they were abstract artists?

JOHN OPPER: Oh, no. I don't think it was a completely revolutionary idea. Although there were articles in there that could be called—

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, sure. But I mean it was open in that different positions could be stated?

JOHN OPPER: I believe it was, yes.

IRVING SANDLER: It seems that way to me.

JOHN OPPER: I believe it was. And, as I say, I was under the impression that it was. But maybe I didn't look for the other articles. Because sometimes you just look for those that you're interested. When Solmon was the editor there might have been more social slant.

IRVING SANDLER: But Solmon was also very favorably disposed to Paris?

JOHN OPPER: Oh, yes. As I say, he used these signboards as you would use rectangular planes almost, one against the other.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

JOHN OPPER: And he did it in a kind of representational way. As I mentioned before, he seemed to me to be one of the forerunners of the later Pop movement. Maybe it never became as good as his.

IRVING SANDLER: Well, Davis in a way used the kind of billboard.

JOHN OPPER: Yes, Davis, too. Davis was doing billboard and technical symbols that he'd found in his environment. It would be a billboard. It might be something to do with Provincetown or Gloucester, some symbolic part of that area that he would use as a shape. I remember he would use an anchor form, for example, in the row.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

JOHN OPPER: And then I remember he did one using gasoline – you know, one of these pumps, these gasoline pumps. Of course he'd simplify it down to the essence of its form. It was a symbol alright. And he did much of that. And also he did quite a bit of – he'd use the printed word of some sign. And he was very satirical. Talking about satire, it was around this time, or a little later – I was thinking of ad Reinhardt and his satirical cartoons – was that in 1938?

IRVING SANDLER: No, that would have been later, around 1940, 1941.

JOHN OPPER: Well, then I met Ad Reinhardt around that time. Not the Union. At the Congress. I became a very good friend of George's at the time and through George I met several of the artists that had been around New York longer than I had been and they knew each other. Ad Reinhardt was one. Giorgio Cavallon was another. And many of these like Reinhardt and Cavallon were on the Project but I don't remember them being in the Union or even seeing them there. They may have been.

IRVING SANDLER: John, tell me a little about the Congress. Why was that formed? Why was it formed separate from the Union?

JOHN OPPER: Well, for the very reason that you mentioned. The Union had gotten the reputation of being a little Left Wing. And there were a number of artists that would not come into that kind of an association who felt strongly against war and against the poverty that was prevalent. And I think the Congress was formed on a broader base to bring in these artists. And another reason too was that primarily the Artists Union was a WPA union, the Project. Some of the artists were not on the Project. They were on different Projects. Stuart Davis I don't believe was ever on the WPA, but he was on the Federal Art Project. They had a Federal Project. The difference between projects was that you were asked to be on one and the other you had to apply.

IRVING SANDLER: That was the one that Bruce ran.

JOHN OPPER: Yes.

IRVING SANDLER: And Holger Cahill ran the WPA?

JOHN OPPER: Ran the other one, yes. And the Congress was a kind of meeting place for both groups. And not all the artists who belonged to the Artists Union belonged to the Artist Congress. But there were many, many artists who were not in the Union who were in the Congress. The Congress was much longer.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. But the Congress was more specifically political, too. Wasn't the American Artists Congress against war and Fascism?

JOHN OPPER: War and Fascism, that's right. Yes, but it wasn't on a local level. It wasn't concerned with union problems that the Union would have to take up. And that the Union would have to take up. And I think the Congress had two or three shows.

IRVING SANDLER: The Congress ran shows?

JOHN OPPER: Yes, exhibitions.

IRVING SANDLER: And did they also run symposiums?

JOHN OPPER: They ran symposiums. And they also tried to raise money by the artists donating paintings for an auction.

IRVING SANDLER: How many Congresses did they have?

JOHN OPPER: Three meetings. Whether they happened all in one year or not or how long a period it lasted I don't recall.

IRVING SANDLER: Of course they put out that one book that I have. A book with a black cover.

JOHN OPPER: Well, there is another one. They had a very big show – was it at Wanamaker's? They had a show at Wanamaker's when it was down on 8th Street.

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, yes?

JOHN OPPER: Yes. You know, the one I'm thinking of was yellow and gray and the cover is very abstract, looks almost like a Modrian.

IRVING SANDLER: Well, I've never seen that. I'll have to track it down.

JOHN OPPER: I thought that Stuart Davis designed it. I'm not sure, but it looked like he might have. I may have it somewhere. Of course in the Congress the majority of artists were representational but there was a good number of semi-abstract artists and the very abstract artists. Max Weber was very active in the Congress. And I met Milton Avery; I had met him before but I met him again there. He also was in the Congress. He was a rather quiet man, wasn't one to speak up. But he participated in exhibitions and donated some of his things for—

IRVING SANDLER: So in a sense then this was an organization where artists indicated their political concern?

JOHN OPPER: Yes. Primarily, it was an association against the Fascism that was going on in Spain. At this time, too, Hitler was on the rise. But mostly it was the Spanish War that stirred up the artists. And they tried to raise money in all sorts of ways. We raised money to send all sorts of goods. I think I told you this little story about Gropper.

IRVING SANDLER: No.

JOHN OPPER: It was very funny. I attended an auction. I had this small painting with two or three little Negro heads. It was a kind of simplified abstraction. At any rate, this painting came up for auction. My Name "Opper" was on it. The guy looks at it, "I have a little painting her by Gropper." I was sitting way in the back. I raised my hand trying to correct the guy. And before I could do that the prices started jumping. Gee, one guy said, "Fifty dollars." Another guy said I don't know how much. The guy next to me nudged me and said, "Shut up! If they think it's a Gropper let them have it."

IRVING SANDLER: One day you're going to see a big retrospective of Gropper's work and you'll be there.

JOHN OPPER: Oh, but I forgot to put the "Gr" on it. It was very funny. We had quite a number of these auctions to raise money. The Congress, too, would charge you a fee to exhibit. And part of that went to the cause. The fee was high enough so that half of it would go to help out in some way. I don't know what they gave it to; I guess they sent it to Spain. I remember that one Congress was held at the New School for Social Research. The whole auditorium was full of artists. They had speakers on the stage. And I recall that most otf the talk then had very little to do with art.

IRVING SANDLER: Was there just one organization? Or did the organization also have like chapters?

JOHN OPPER: If it did I wasn't aware of it.

IRVING SANDLER: So, every now and then there would be a general meeting?

JOHN OPPER: Yes, that's what I remember. I don't think there were any separate little groups. Oh, sometimes we would break off in groups to go out and talk.

IRVING SANDLER: I understand that the organization broke up because of the Soviet-Nazi Pact.

JOHN OPPER: Well, you see, that's getting a little bit later. That's about 1939.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

JOHN OPPER: It was beginning to break up anyway. The Artists Union was beginning to break up.

IRVING SANDLER: Why was that?

JOHN OPPER: Because the WPA was beginning to peter out.

IRVING SANDLER: I see.

JOHN OPPER: And many of the artists either went into teaching or found jobs in industry.

IRVING SANDLER: There was an organization after the war broke out that tried to continue the Projects privately – something like Artists for Victory? Did you have anything to do with that, John?

JOHN OPPER: But that was more of a poster thing.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

JOHN OPPER: The idea there was to make posters to be used as propaganda for the war against the Nazis. But I never belonged to it. First of all, I was already involved with the Navy. While I wasn't in the Navy, I was working for the Navy, a specialist.

IRVING SANDLER: Did you ever join the organization called the Federation of Modern Painters and sculptors?

JOHN OPPER: No, I never did.

IRVING SANDLER: Because I think Avery was a member of that.

JOHN OPPER: No, I never did that. When was that formed?

IRVING SANDLER: I guess around 1939 or 1940.

JOHN OPPER: As a matter of fact, around that time I drew away from organizations. I began to pull away. I dropped out of the American Abstract Artists. And the Congress had by then folded.

IRVING SANDLER: As a young artist what was the effect of these various activities on you work?

JOHN OPPER: Well, they were very confusing to say the least. Especially in my case where I was torn between the needs of the society and the needs of the war on one hand, and on the other hand what I felt were aesthetic needs of painting. So finally the only solution that I was able to make for myself was to begin to separate the two. I was quite active socially, as much as I could be. And as far as my paintings were concerned I began to abstract from nature and work very

abstractly.

IRVING SANDLER: You know, there's been a tendency very recently to put down the thirties as a very bad time for American Art.

JOHN OPPER: Well, I can't quite agree because I thought the thirties was a very vital time for American art. And I question whether the forties, the abstract expressionist movement could have developed as it did had it not been for the thirties. Here you had artists who never had an opportunity to do any work who if it hadn't been for the WPA might have gone off into all sorts of directions; but here you got together whether it was the Union or the Congress or whether it was at a bar or some place. And you talked about art. And you heard about important artists, and you began to live art. Most of us – or in my case, and I think I was a pretty good example of many of the artist of the period – came on the scene with a very traditional background. So, in the thirties you had the breakdown of this representational or this lack of vitality in American art that we had been taught. But in the thirties we became aware that a great deal was missing there. And I know from my own case that while I didn't do much in the thirties it was a great gestation period. You know, you went through the whole process of being born as an artist, really. I think this was true of many, many artists. I remember that I had a loft that I shared with McNeil. He had one side and I had the other side. McNeil was working on the Mural Project and I was working on the Easel Project. And I was very much influenced by McNeil's work at the time. I knew very little about abstract art. He was working on a big mural – maybe it wasn't as big as I thought it was.

IRVING SANDLER: He doesn't remember that.

JOHN OPPER: Listen, I remember something else about his work. He used to work like mad and if it wouldn't come off, he'd take paint remover, put it over the whole surface, and scrape it. And then he'd paint again on it. Well, you know, I believe he was the first abstract expressionist that I know because of this very accidental process that he was working with. He'd have two or three undercoats and then he'd put another coat on top of it. I once mentioned this to George and I said that that period reminded me very much of the work that de Kooning was doing. And George in a very modest way said, "Yes, but de Kooning does it better."

IRVING SANDLER: Was that in George's studio?

JOHN OPPER: It was in George's studio.

IRVING SANDLER: Was there a guy that George knew named Panterhoff – or am I getting things confused?

JOHN OPPER: I don't know. He may have.

IRVING SANDLER: I understand that was a very large mural, or mural-sized picture.

JOHN OPPER: It was a big mural.

IRVING SANDLER: And I specifically asked George about it because other people had seen it. And he didn't remember it.

JOHN OPPER: I liked it very much. I don't know what ever happened to it.

IRVING SANDLER: Do you know who else talked a lot about that particular mural to me? Fritz Bultman.

JOHN OPPER: Oh, really?

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. He also saw it and he said it was really beautiful.

JOHN OPPER: I don't know what happened to it. I think George turned it in; he must have turned it in to the Project. And at that time mostly what the Mural project went for was the anti-subject school, which later became the hard-edge school. And George was an expressionist. He was an expressionist from the first go. Even that was the most hard-edge thing I've ever seen him do. And this mural he did I thought was one of the nicest things the abstract artists were doing. It was something completely new. And it disappeared. I don't' know where.

IRVING SANDLER: You were on which division again?

JOHN OPPER: The Easel Project. And I stayed on that for three years.

IRVING SANDLER: Did you know Pollock? He was on that project too, wasn't he?

JOHN OPPER: I knew Pollock, but at that time he was working very representationally.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. This would have been when?

JOHN OPPER: Oh, 1936? 1939? I think Pollock started working with the non-representational around 1940. I don't know how much influence Lee Krasner had on him.

IRVING SANDLER: Well, she didn't meet him until around 1942.

JOHN OPPER: He didn't start exhibiting until around then, did he?

IRVING SANDLER: That's right. He didn't.

JOHN OPPER: No. I didn't know Jackson too well. I knew his brother better, the one that died some years ago. He was an older brother. I remember Jackson was a very quiet person, kind of shy. But I didn't know him in his latter years because I had left the New York scene during the years when things were really hopping here.

IRVING SANDLER: So as far as you were concerned the thirties would have been a very important period for artists to live through.

JOHN OPPER: I think so. It was the period that made the forties, the abstract expressionist movement. Look, as I stop to think back practically all the leaders of the abstract expressionist movement were very active as painters in the thirties: de Kooning, Kline, Rothko,

IRVING SANDLER: Gottlieb.

JOHN OPPER: --Gottlieb, Gorky. And of course you know the abstract expressionist movement was a middle-aged group movement. The artist were either in their thirties or past their thirties. So my feelings were that in the thirties for most of us it was kind of getting rid of all this junk that we had built up, and when the forties came around we were able to paint. We were more mature painters. I think I told you last time of going to these life drawing classes at Milton Avery's place not classes – life drawing, he just had a model and there were several different groups and we'd all chip in and pay the model and just worked there.

IRVING SANDLER: And that again would have been in the thirties?

JOHN OPPER: In the late thirties. And that's where I first Mark Rothko. And Gottlieb later. Rothko was doing kind of representational work at that time. He went into Surrealism later.

IRVING SANDLER: That's true. In the early forties.

JOHN OPPER: So did Gottlieb.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

JOHN OPPER: And most of theme more or less were representational. And of course Avery—we all respected him.

IRVING SANDLER: What role did Surrealism play? Because in 1937 there was a huge show at the Museum of Modern Art.

JOHN OPPER: And there was another big show, you know. Abstract art and Surrealist art in Chicago. Oh, that came much later.

IRVING SANDLER: That was 1947. No, this thing was called "Surrealism, Dada and Fantastic Art" at the Museum of Modern Art.

JOHN OPPER: Yes.

IRVING SANDLER: But the American Abstract Artists wouldn't have had much sympathy for it.

JOHN OPPER: No, they did not. At least the group that I was affiliated with among my friends. We thought much of it was promotional. At least I did. I think at the time I formed some of ideas about art that I probably have today. Ad Reinhardt put it very well when he said art is the only concern of the artist. And that was my feeling, that anything other than that may be very interesting for publicity and made good news, but it really had nothing to do with art. The only thing important to art is that which changes the format, the basic—

IRVING SANDLER: Language?

JOHN OPPER: Yes, the language and the substance of it.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

JOHN OPPER: I was never really personally much interested in Surrealism. To me it was a literary movement. Miro of course was the exception.

IRVING SANDLER: What about Masson?

JOHN OPPER: Yes, but I didn't see it as surrealistic art. See, at that time I began to feel that I didn't see their subject matter as any different from the realists. You know, if the realist were able to do a good painting abstractly I probably would have like it. I began to become very formalist in my painting. I never quite got to the point where I did purist type art.

IRVING SANDLER: What about the Bauhaus? Did that play much of a Role?

JOHN OPPER: Not with the group I was with. It probably did influence several artists. I think it might have influenced Balcomb Greene. It might have influenced Gertrude Greene. But the group that I was closely aligned with were the intuitive painters, you know.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

JOHN OPPER: that stemmed out of the Hofmann branch. See, we had two branches.

IRVING SANDLER: What was Hofmann's attitude to the Bauhaus?

JOHN OPPER: I believe Hofmann did not think of the Bauhaus as a school for painters. He thought of it as a very important school in the area of design and architecture. But he did not think of it as having much influence on painting. However, he did have a great deal of respect for some of the men—Klee, of course.

IRVING SANDLER: Kandinsky?

JOHN OPPER: He talked of Albers.

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, he did?

JOHN OPPER: Yes. It's funny. I remember once years later I met Albers out in Seattle, Washington. He was judging a show. And I got to talk to him. I told him that I worked with Hofmann. And he had nothing but praise for him.

IRVING SANDLER: For Hofmann?

JOHN OPPER: For Hofmann. And here they were at two opposite ends of the pole, at that time.

IRVING SANDLER: That's right.

JOHN OPPER: I think they came closer together – Hofmann did anyway – in his later life when he started painting rectangles.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes, rectangles.

JOHN OPPER: But at the time they were as far apart as you could be, I think. One was painting from his guts and the other had to have some rationale to his work. But they both had a great deal of respect for one another.

IRVING SANDLER: That's interesting. I wouldn't have imagined that. What would have been the attitude, say of the group you were associated with to someone like Marin?

JOHN OPPER: Well, Marin was the first quasi-abstractionist that impressed me. Even before I came to New York I started painting Marin-ish, Marin-like paintings. I don't think they thought too much about Marin. I mean he wasn't rated too high as a painter. Out standards were very high. I think it was because of Hofmann. The men that Hofmann talked about always were the top men and you always felt that you never really could achieve that goal. And I never remember Hofmann ever mentioning Marin in any of his criticisms.

IRVING SANDLER: He did talk about Kandinsky though?

JOHN OPPER: Oh, he talked about Kandinsky. He talked about Miro. He talked about Matisse. He had a great admiration for Matisse. I think he knew them all personally before he came to this country.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. He was in Paris from 1904 to 1914.

JOHN OPPER: So, he knew them when they were young men and he was a young man and they were all working together. I don't know what happened to Hofmann. He stopped painting for quite a number of years.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

JOHN OPPER: He went through some sort of a period where he didn't work –he drew but he didn't do any painting. But as for John Marin, the group that I associated with never really considered him a great painter. Although we considered him a good American painter, he had his limitations. He was kind of superficial. He was a little bit in that sense like Dufy.

IRVING SANDLER: Did you know John Graham at all?

JOHN OPPER: No, I never did know John Gram. John was not in New York. Or if he was I didn't know him. I never met him. If I did I don't remember who he was.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. Because some of the people that you've mentioned throughout our talk were people who also knew him.

JOHN OPPER: Well, I may have met him but I really never got to know him. I think what happened at that time though – it happens now too – you begin to narrow your circle of friends.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

JOHN OPPER: I didn't have too many artist friends. In the latter thirties threre were maybe half a dozen artists that I would meet and talk with. And that would have been George McNeil—

JOHN OPPER: George McNeil, Cavallon, Harry Bowden and his wife (he went out to the West Coast), Alber Swinden, and oh, yes Miron Sokole. Do you know him? He wasn't an abstract painter at all.

IRVING SANDLER: I know the name.

JOHN OPPER: He used to do a kind of – it looked a bit like Avery's work with his more – it never had the purity of color or design that Avery had. I knew him. Oh, and, you see, when I moved out of my studio at George's place, I took another studio on 16th Street and Sixth Avenue. And do you know who was in the building there? There was one of the brothers – the little short brothers.

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, Soyer?

JOHN OPPER: Moses Soyer. And James Lechay. A completely different group of artists. And let's see, there was another guy, Harry Schaumberg, I think were in that building. Here you had the realists.

IRVING SANDLER: That's right.

JOHN OPPER: But I was still the abstractionist working among the realists.

IRVING SANDLER: Let me turn the tape over, John. This is the end of the first side of the second interview with John Opper.

[END OF TAPE 2 – SIDE 1]
[TAPE 2 – SIDE 2]

IRVING SANDLER: Of these people that we were just talking about, Swinden was very active in the American Abstract Artists. As a matter of fact, many of the meetings were in his studio.

JOHN OPPER: Swinden was a very quiet guy.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. What was he like, George?

JOHN OPPER: He was a very withdrawing person, very shy. He wouldn't talk unless you actually asked him a question. He wouldn't offer anything. But he was a terrific painter.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

JOHN OPPER: He was one of the best painters in the group, I think, at that time. And we met at this loft several times. And I don't know what ever happed to Swinden. All I heard was he got married and then he suddenly dropped out. And nobody ever heard about him for a long time.

IRVING SANDLER: yes, but he was always on Tenth Street.

JOHN OPPER: Did he continue to paint?

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. I didn't see the whole body of work but some of the people from the Tanager Gallery when I was there managed to get a picture from him every now and then. And it was sort of a mixture between figurative and geometric abstraction. It was a kind of hard-edge figure towards the end.

JOHN OPPER: Really? That's interesting. Because at the time that I saw him he was doing straight abstractions.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. But then the figure came back.

JOHN OPPER: They were really great paintings that he was doing. At least that's what my memory of it. He was a kind of inhibited guy. And he seemed to express himself…His paintings were very powerful, very strong. You would think he would be one of those robust persons like Gorky, for instance. But he was the opposite of Gorky. He was very withdrawn. He was tall and slender. And the other painter that I mentioned who was very, very gifted was Harry Bowden. He went out the West Coast and became interested in photography, I think. He was good. I think he has since died.

IRVING SANDLER: What was he like, John?

JOHN OPPER: He looked a little bit like Ad Reinhardt. There was some similarity there. Only he had a little more of a kind of bullish look about him. Ad was more genteel, much more genteel. Hara was a very, very positive painter. He knew exactly what he wanted to do. He knew where he was going to go, and who was an important painter, and who was not. And he would waste his time on anybody who wasn't important. He had a very good understanding of art because the man he admired was Matisse. Of course he admired the kind of abstract Matisses. And he painted somewhat like that. There was a great deal of Matisse influence in his work. Just like the early Gorky's had Picasso influence. And I always thought that he was one of the artists that would become a really good artist.

IRVING SANDLER: But he sort of left it?

JOHN OPPER: he gave it up for some reason.

IRVING SANDLER: Swinden became very much of a recluse, didn't he?

JOHN OPPER: I don't know whether Swinden's marriage had something to do with it. Swinden was the kind of guy that probably—He always gave the impression of being a very unhappy man. He might have been sick, too. I don't know. He looked sick. He always had sunken cheeks. I liked Cavallon. I still do. Cavallon used to do some beautiful little paintings and water colors – just simple flat shapes. They were very beautiful things. I remember. Cavallon and George and myself too a summer trip together.

IRVING SANDLER: When was this? Do you remember?

JOHN OPPER: About 1937 I think.

IRVING SANDLER: Where did you go?

JOHN OPPER: To Maine. And we painted. And had fun most of the time. But Cavallon was always a very, very hard worker. And he had a classic quality to his work. And also a very thin quality. Do you know what I mean?

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. White light.

JOHN OPPER: Brightness, yes. He always had a great deal of light. And this was characteristic of his watercolors in the early thirties. And the same quality he carried on in his later paintings.

IRVING SANDLER: He wasn't working in the rectangular milieu?

JOHN OPPER: Not yet. I think that started in the forties. I don't believe he was doing that in the thirties. He was working in these more fluid shapes in the thirties.

IRVING SANDLER: What happened to your own work in the forties?

JOHN OPPER: See, during the war I did some work; not too much.

IRVING SANDLER: You were in the Navy?

JOHN OPPER: I worked for the Navy from 1941 to about 1944. But at the end in 1944 I took a job. I left New York and Went to North Carolina and started painting again. And my work began – I guess you might call it – of course there is more abstract expressionism in it than anything. I stayed there only a year. And then I went to Wyoming. And in Wyoming I was very much impressed with the countryside. It seemed to me to just fall into the abstract forms, the mountains, you know, and the vast space and the tremendous, beautiful skies. You'd see a cloud up there five miles long. Since then I've seen that Motherwell sometimes has done these paper collages that remind me of some of these cloud forms that I used to see out there. Well anyway, I started working with a kind of abstract style form nature. You could only recognize it as from nature in the sense that there was a form that was maybe a mountain, a big shape.

IRVING SANDLER: Implied horizon line.

JOHN OPPER: Yes. And Katharine Kuh came around at that time looking for works for that 1947 show. And she liked this one very much and she included it in this show. But in Wyoming all my paintings were from nature.

IRVING SANDLER: Do you have a catalogue of that show incidentally, John? That 1947 show?

JOHN OPPER: I probably have. The show was called American Abstract art and Surrealism.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. I'll get it. I've never seen it.

JOHN OPPER: I think it has a black cat on the cover. I'll look for it.

IRVING SANDLER: That's all right. They'll have it at the Modern. You said you were working from nature.

JOHN OPPER: Oh, yes, I worked from nature there. When I left Wyoming I went to Alabama. I've mentioned before the artists being outside of New York. There's a terrible hunger among artists to be with other artists and to be where things are going on. Now it wasn't so bad in Wyoming because somebody left and I told George about the job and George came out for about a year or two. I don't know how long he stayed. So George was there.

IRVING SANDLER: This would have been about 1947 or 1048?

JOHN OPPER: 1947 – 1948. And we worked together only a year until I got into a mix-up—

IRVING SANDLER: Yes, you mentioned that.

JOHN OPPER: So, I left and went to Alabama. In Alabama I continued to paint from nature. I might say it became close to Matisse in quality. I painted from nature, I painted from the model – I had students pose for me – in highly simplified forms. And the worst part about living away was that I destroyed so much of my work instead of taking it with me. I thought I'm not going to carry this stuff around, I'll just leave it. I'm very sorry I did this because I probably left things that I'd like to have had. And most of it was painted on masonite so it could easily have been moved.

IRVING SANDLER: Sure.

JOHN OPPER: I've always been terrible sorry. Then I came back to New York and stayed in New York a short time.

IRVING SANDLER: And that would have been in 1948?

JOHN OPPER: 1949. I was offered a part-time job and a scholarship at Columbia.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. And that's when you too the degree?

JOHN OPPER: Then I took the degree. And that's the time I made my mistake. I should have stayed in New York.

IRVING SANDLER: Did you go down to The Club then?

JOHN OPPER: I did. I went to The Club several times. And I taught at Colombia and in the evening I'd go to Pratt. At Pratt I met several of the artists. I met Kline there.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. He wasn't very reliable. But he had a class. And sometimes he'd show up and sometimes he wouldn't. But he was there.

IRVING SANDLER: That would have been right before the black and white abstracts?

JOHN OPPER: Yes.

IRVING SANDLER: Who else was there? I never realized that Kline had done some teaching.

JOHN OPPER: I think Tony Smith was there. He wasn't teaching painting. He was teaching architecture.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes, but that was the time he would have also been at NYU [New York University]. He could have been teaching at both places, but in 1949 he was also on the faculty with Baziotes.

JOHN OPPER: It must have been. It was between 1949 and 1952 because I never taught at Pratt after that. I know I met Tony Smith there. I know I met Kline. And Mercedes Carles was there.

IRVING SANDLER: Did you know her from Hofmann?

JOHN OPPER: I met her at the Hofmann School, yes. Before I came back, around 1947 I started working in a very abstract expressionistic way. And my only contact with New York was *Art News*. And it was very frustrating, you know, just to see reproductions. I painted some very large paintings. I was very much impressed with [Bradley Walker] Tomlin's work around that time, but I never saw an original until I got to New York in 1949; I just saw reproductions of it.

IRVING SANDLER: Did you meet Bradley?

JOHN OPPER: I met him; I mean I was introduced to him but I never really got to know him. When I got back I started to paint. And just about this time Egan was forming his group. When did Egan form his gallery?

IRVING SANDLER: I guess about 1947. Because de Kooning had his first show there in 1948. And Cavallon showed there.

JOHN OPPER: Yes. And I had met Charlie [Egan] before that when he was at Ferargil's. And he advised me to stay in New York and paint. And I don't know – I may have joined his group then – I did belong until 1955 and then I closed the gallery. But from 1949 on my work was very – it wasn't really abstract expressionistic though. It had a kind of "definity" about it that the abstract expressionists did not have.

IRVING SANDLER: A what?

JOHN OPPER: A defined quality.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. I think I first saw your work around 1955 in Provincetown.

JOHN OPPER: well, the Provincetown things were the kind of thing that I was doing. Usually there'd be a big shape in one corner, the bottom corner or something.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. But the ones I saw had a sense of nature.

JOHN OPPER: Well, all my paintings until about 1958 had very much the coloring of nature. They would be a green shade or a red shade or something like that. In 1957 -1958 I began to work with these – well, do you remember coming up to the studio where I began to interlock shapes?

IRVING SANDLER: That's right.

JOHN OPPER: And then I began to change the color. To keep the color very simple. There would be two or three large planes.

IRVING SANDLER: Well, one of the things about the first works of yours that I saw in Provincetown was that they were very painterly, gestural painting.

JOHN OPPER: Yes. Textured.

IRVING SANDLER: Very articulated, textured, etc. And then at one point about the time the meshed forms started there was a simplification that took place.

JOHN OPPER: On the surface.

IRVING SANDLER: And also a cutting away of the texture.

JOHN OPPER: Yes. At that time I deliberately denied the texture, the painterly quality in order to get the simplicity of the shape itself. Because sometimes I became conscious of the texture or the brush, and the painterly quality was the thing that appealed. And that bothered me. The form failed to exist fully and as completely as it should because of the painterliness of the surfaces. You know, the one that you mentioned—I think you mentioned a green on with – I think it was light green with a kind of dark brownish corner.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. Yes.

JOHN OPPER: Well, the whole green area was intended actually to be one surface to more or less lay on the surface, but painterly. But people saw the painting quality rather than the flatness of the surface.

IRVING SANDLER: That's right.

JOHN OPPER: That's when I began to move away from it.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes, I know my reaction was far more to the painterliness than to the form.

JOHN OPPER: Yes. Well, you see, actually I saw it as the big shape and all the surrounding area. That was my intention. But I discovered that in order to accomplish that, I would have to eliminate the obvious painterly quality. So that's what I started doing.

IRVING SANDLER: So, in other words, the shift took place because you desired a certain articulation of form?

JOHN OPPER: Right. That started about 1955. And when I found that the painterliness or the way I applied the surface – Well, actually I worked with a muted surface, a changing surface – the color kind of changed on the surface. What it did was call attention to factors that I felt were secondary. And the major thing seemed to become minor. I wanted to get the impact of these two forms working against each other. And that even existed in space. See, at that time again my whole concept of painting changed. Up to then I was more or less interested in the Cubist approach to painting, the overlapping planes and suggestion of space, and nature moving in and out, and Hofmann's push pull business (Which I never understood). But anyway I thought that was the important thing. Around that time I began to feel that with the two-dimensional quality you can create a dramatic intensity on the picture plane that's even greater than all this Cubistic push pull business. So I began to avoid overlapping planes. But I still kept to the brushy quality. I would still

have that raggy edge. And when I say my work became very "definitive" in the later work: I eliminated the ragged edge and it became almost hard-edge.

IRVING SANDLER: That's right. But then it seemed at one point that the color almost became primary in your work.

JOHN OPPER: Well, my color changed not because of – I didn't set out with any creed of any kind that I would limit myself to these colors. I also began to feel that as my forms became abstract and, as you said, my color was naturalistic, I was quite aware that if the forms were abstract in order for the painting to be successful the color would need to be as abstract as the forms were. That's when I started searching for arbitrary use of colors and flattening the color.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

JOHN OPPER: I never really got to the point where I wanted a dead pan surface.

IRVING SANDLER: No. You still haven't got that today.

JOHN OPPER: I didn't want it. Because instinctively I liked the richness of the color. But, on the other hand, would you say that too much texture would work against the color?

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, yes. And – Well, as I developed, I learned not only that too much of anything…I discovered for myself mostly through trial and error I guess that the paintings that I found most successful – my own paintings, and those that I liked of others – were those in which you weren't aware of anything outstanding, any element that was outstanding over any other element. It existed as a painting. You know, the funny thing about it is that – well, I thought I was being quite unique and original. But it seemed to be in the air—in the climate. Other artists were also thinking this way. I found this to be true—that things developed in different studios at about the same time. And you're totally unaware of each other.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. Like the time that you're doing it Leon Polk Smith's art has similar ideas. Ellsworth Kelly was working with somewhat similar ideas.

JOHN OPPER: That's right.

IRVING SANDLER: And you didn't know these guys?

JOHN OPPER: I didn't know them. And it was very disturbing to me when they beat me to show.

IRVING SANDLER: Well, they really didn't. Not that much.

JOHN OPPER: well, only in that the first guy always gets the credit; after that they're all followers.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. But not really. Because your work—

JOHN OPPER: I showed in 1959.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. Which was very early. You know, that antedates the color field guys.

JOHN OPPER: The painting was kind of color field though.

IRVING SANDLER: Sure it was. As a matter of fact, one of the interesting things about the 1959 show was that you were already working with this, you know, fluctuating positive and negative

space—

JOHN OPPER: Side by side.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes, they were side by side but you couldn't figure out the figure ground relationship. They both could be figure or ground depending on how the eye caught them.

JOHN OPPER: That's it. I feel a dichotomy. You stimulate a kind of inner excitement in a painting. I think sometimes.

IRVING SANDLER: There's no two ways about it. One of the interesting things, John, is that when I saw the pictures in Provincetown I wouldn't have thought of Matisse.

JOHN OPPER: No, you wouldn't.

IRVING SANDLER: And in a funny way you sort of come—

JOHN OPPER: Full circle?

IRVING SANDLER: It's sort of a circle. I didn't realize that you were interested in him that early.

JOHN OPPER: I was always interested in Matisse.

IRVING SANDLER: But these paintings probably have it, say, more strongly, or they certainly have it more strongly than the pictures I saw in the fifties—the middle fifties.

JOHN OPPER: The ones in Provincetown did not have the…Well, you see, to me they did. And that was the funny thing, that I didn't see the painterly quality interfering with the shape forms. I just saw it as an exciting surface. And when people started talking about the painterly quality it annoyed the hell out of me. But I think too at that time I probably had to get it out of my system. I painted very juicy paintings. And probably if I hadn't done that then I would have done it at some time or other because after I did it I no longer felt the need for it. I never have since. My show now certainly doesn't go back to those paintings of 1958. They're kind of in between, aren't they?

IRVING SANDLER: Yes – No. It's interesting because the tendency at one point was to move into extremely simple forms like two or so on a canvas, large forms.

JOHN OPPER: Yes.

IRVING SANDLER: And now in your later work you're becoming more complex.

JOHN OPPER: Yes. Well, now I just paint whatever comes. Then it was really more or less a discipline I set for myself and I did it this way. Now, I'm playing with color and bits of color.

IRVING SANDLER: To me it's a curious paradox because you just said that one of the reasons that you were simplifying was to clarify the form, you know around 1958, or in the late 50s when the shift occurred. And it never occurred to me – because I always thought you were simplifying in order to bring out the color.

JOHN OPPER: It's a combination of both I think.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes, I guess it was. I was just interested in the emphasis you put—

JOHN OPPER: You know, if you could use the word talent, I've always had a feeling for color that I did not have to struggle for. I probably had to struggle more for shape than I did for color. Color came much easier. When I did those painterly paintings, those simple two forms practically interlocking and some of them just remained static. I still have some of those in the studio. And I like them. They're still very powerful and very nice. I think what happened is that – well, after all how many paintings can you paint without getting your fill of them. So you try the opposite. The paintings I did for this last show many of them started off very simply, just two large shapes just the way I had been doing earlier. But they didn't look enough. They looked as though I was just repeating myself. They looked as though I had been here before, you know. So I started to play around with other things. And I kind of feel that maybe these paintings are more influenced by Matisse than any paintings I've yet done.

IRVING SANDLER: The ones in the show, in the gallery, yes.

JOHN OPPER: Probably more than anything I've done. And they're probably mostly my own because they're a combination of everything I've done in my…You see, I've come to the point now where I just paint and let it come. Of course when I say that it doesn't mean that I don't have a concept. It's quite evident that there's a relationship from the one painting to another, you know. And why do I keep the vertical line? I don't know why. I guess I like verticals. I always used to find the vertical line as having a kind of uplifting quality. I remember I once did a painting—Did you ever see the painting that NYU owns The Apartment House?

IRVING SANDLER: Yes, I have.

JOHN OPPER: Well, I made sketches a long time ago when I was in Greece. I was very much impressed with the vertical columns. I don't know why – it's not only the vertical columns. Every time I go into a church – all these sheer verticals. My God, they are so impressive. I said, gee, if it works here it ought to work in a painting. I like the grandeur of the vertical.

IRVING SANDLER: But this is all felt form? You don't work with any concept of the content or subject.

JOHN OPPER: Oh, no. I haven't worked with a subject in mid for at least fifteen years. The only subject would be if you can call a shape a subject. Which I suppose it is. And I could never paint direct like some artists. With my paintings I usually struggle.

IRVING SANDLER: But you don't work from drawings?

JOHN OPPER: Oh, no. No. I never make a drawing. Oh, I've mad drawings but I mean—

IRVING SANDLER: Yes, but not for paintings.

JOHN OPPER: Oh, there have been times in my life when I've tried to copy a drawing. But I never could do it.

IRVING SANDLER: But then when you say your paintings are "struggled" you still don't leave any signs in the recent work.

JOHN OPPER: No. No. I think after all any mature painter – and I hope I am one – doesn't show the agonies that he goes through any more than you do in your writing. But, you know, it doesn't come easy. But it has to look as though it came easy.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

JOHN OPPER: The struggle for that look of easiness, that simplicity, that—

IRVING SANDLER: One of the things about all of your work which is so beautiful, John, is almost that sort of measure, the interval, you know, the color dissolves into—

JOHN OPPER: I think this is an intuitive thing. And strangely enough, I've never shown this because I showed it to some people and they didn't seem to respond to it. I did several paintings like this. And they didn't respond to it. And I've had these – these paintings are six or eight years old.

IRVING SANDLER: In the work at the gallery you use that framing device.

JOHN OPPER: Yes.

IRVING SANDLER: What led to that?

JOHN OPPER: One reason why I felt—I have the feeling that my paintings have to be put to rest; that they continue on the edge they seem to need something. So that was one of the reasons. Another thing I found out was that the color functioned better when I put a bland color up against it. So I started out using it here. Because when I put this white paint here the other colors began to function in a kind of surrealistic way. They became moving.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. Yes.

JOHN OPPER: Before they didn't look that way. Not as much anyway. But the contrast of the two did it. And of course I thought I'd create little frames. The reason I did it in the ones at the show is to have – I thought the picture might float. Originally I intended to hang them without the frames. But the paintings I've had at shows, especially these white ones, always come back banged up.

IRVING SANDLER: That's right. Yes.

JOHN OPPER: And I did it for protection, that's all. And that's the only reason why I framed them.

IRVING SANDLER: I wandered because, you know, another thing it does in a sense is contain.

JOHN OPPER: Well, the idea was to contain. I remember talking to Rothko and he said he wanted his pictures to expanding.

IRVING SANDLER: That's right.

JOHN OPPER: I thought that a painting ought to be contained – that a painting should have its home. That is it. Here's where I live. And I think his paintings do too, by the way.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. Since the rectangles are with in rectangles.

JOHN OPPER: It does stop. Your eye does that automatically.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. Hey, John, I think we've worked hard enough. You're tired.

JOHN OPPER: Yes.

IRVING SANDLER: This is the end of the second side of the second interview with John Opper.

[END OF TAPE 2 – SIDE 2]
[TAPE 3 – SIDE 1]
[Tape-recording of an interview with John Opper January 3, 1969.]

IRVING SANDLER: This is the third interview with John Opper, January 3rd or so, 1969. John, I have some just general questions here. Some stuff we've gone over but I just want to sort of find out more about it. One of the things that you could probably understand more, than, say, most artists of your generation is the specific role that New York plays in an artist's development and also in an artist's career. Because there were certain periods that you were outside of New York, and then you would come back. And I think probably you felt that because you were outside at certain points —

JOHN OPPER: Well, I think the point that you make is a very good one. It did happen that at the beginning of the abstract expressionist movement I unfortunately left New York to take a job elsewhere. One of the problems, of course, that I faced immediately was lack of companionship in my own area, or people who I could relate to in painting. The only source that I had available were the periodicals that came occasionally. And these were often very misleading, as all reproductions in periodicals may be. I first left New York in 1945 just about when the abstract expressionist movement was beginning to take a kind of momentum. And I remember on e to the reproductions that influenced me quite a bit at that time was Pollock's She Wolf. I don't know when it was reproduced but it was some time around that period. He had not as yet gone into his drip paintings. He was still painting somewhat on the subject. And this happened to me. In my natural reaction to landscape—Wyoming let itself to me anyway, to abstract expressionist interpretation because of the countryside, the vast plains. You know, the tremendous, monumental shapes that you saw. You never saw a simple sky. A cloud was always, oh, huge. It would spread over a whole mountain. Everything was big. And the clearness; everything was always sharp and vital and clear. And I began to work at the time in what might be called abstract expressionistic painting in that I worked from nature. The mountains became forms, the sky shapes became abstract images. And while I think it was abstract expressionistic painting there was enough of subject matter in it that you could relate to it – it had the feeling of nature, the vastness of nature. Around that time I think – it was in 1947 I believe that the American Abstract Artists and Surrealist Show was held in Chicago.

IRVING SANDLER: That was 1947.

JOHN OPPER: I wasn't there at that time. I had gone to some sort of meeting I guess. Katharine Kuh came. Unfortunately, I missed here. But McNeil was there. We were both teaching together at the same time. He showed her his work and then he showed her my work. And she was taken by both.

IRVING SANDLER: Did she choose both works for this show? You were in that show?

JOHN OPPER: Yes. We were both in this show. And what was very interesting, too, was the comment that she made in her introduction to the show. She spoke of the lack of inspiration that artists experienced once they left New York. And she spoke of this great almost like an isolated desert with a few oases here and there. And she mentioned the University of Wyoming as being on of these oases, you know, where something was going on. And I think that was true. Of course it was nice when George came there. But after I left the University of Wyoming and went to the University of Alabama there the stimulation from what was going on in New York – of course during this time I would make frequent visits to New York City. I felt it was almost a need for me. See this is a thing that I think is unique for painters. It is possible for to be a writer and be isolated from other writers. If you get there books it's more or less first-hand material. But that is not the case with the

painter. He sees reproductions. And often the reproduction and the original painting – well, I mean I don't have to tell you this – are so extreme. Or slides. And I have never seen a bad slide yet. The fact that they have light behind them gives such a glow and sometimes the picture isn't that way. Well, this is one thing I found a lack in my being away from New York City. Also the climate was not a creative one. In Alabama I was the only member of the faculty who was working in that kind of abstract expressionist vein. But there were students who had returned from – you know, on the GI Bill who were advanced students and very capable students. There were about three or four that were very interested in abstract expressionism. So we had this little nucleus where we worked. But I felt very much alone and very alienated.

IRVING SANDLER: What's the value of the scene or theses contacts? Would it have to do with the availability of pictures? Or does it also exist in the talk?

JOHN OPPER: Well, the strange and wonderful thing about New York is that there isn't so much of this exchange of ideas. When I was away from New York I was always thinking-well, you come to New York and you talk over different things that are bugging you, different ideas. But when artists get together they often don't speak about their problems. Oh there'll be generalities made, they'll talk about some artist's work or something. That I think was important. But the most important thing I found in New York is that there is a climate, and I'm sure it still exists—that just being here, just knowing things are going on, that you're apart of it, makes you work. When I was living outside of New York, I found that I would paint – although there were a few people on the faculty or in the town who were interested but you could count them on the fingers of one hand – so you kind of felt as though you were painting more as a therapeutic thing, that you were doing it for your own sanity. Of course I think a great deal of that probably does exist in painting; I don't deny it, but I think you have to have more than that to keep going. Well, I felt a great need to get back to New York. And I did get back. I got a fellowship. You see I had a couple of kids by then and I did not have the courage, like some artists did, to take a chance and live on their work and see what would happen. I felt I had to get some kind of income that I could depend on.

IRVING SANDLER: Sure.

JOHN OPPER: So from Alabama I was offered a fellowship to come to Teachers College as an instructor and also to take some courses. Well, I was here in New York for three years. I did some painting. But unfortunately I was involved with the damn academic work and couldn't do as much painting as I wanted to. But even then the gallery had, you know, de Kooning—Charlie Egan [Gallery]—Well I had known Charlie before. And Charlie saw my work and he said if I would stay in New York that he thought he would be able to work me in, and he thought he could help me make it a career. When I completed my work at Columbia that summer I was offered an artist in residence job in Burnsville, which is very near Black Mountain College. And it seemed very exciting to be near all that. And it was. Because I did get to meet all the people that were at Black Mountain College. At that time John Cage was still there, also I think Tworkov was there. He came for a short time. Of course, Albers was there. So I found it very stimulating. But, While I was there I was offered a job as associate professor at North Carolina. And again I weakened and took the job. But to get back to your original question, it is very difficult I believe for an artist to be isolated from the center and still function. I think it is necessary for an artist to have other artists to show his work to, or just to talk to. Or sometimes, as I stated to say, in New York there are times when I don't see anybody but I feel part of it; I don't have to see them and they don't have to see me. And of course there are all the galleries and the shows going on. Sometimes I go to see shows; sometimes I don't. But I know that they're there. And this is very important.

IRVING SANDLER: John, one more question along these lines because you've kind of been through

it all. You know, one of the problems that American Artists have always had to face was just the problem of survival. You have done it through teaching. You've supported you art through teaching.

JOHN OPPER: Yes.

IRVING SANDLER: Now what are the advantages or disadvantages of that? Do you find there's any conflict? Is this the most efficient way an artist can support himself?

JOHN OPPER: There are advantages and disadvantages. The advantages are obvious, you know. You can get to experiment, to do anything you want. Many artists do that whether they have a job or not. But I also think that those artists have managed to simplify their lives so that this is possible.

IRVING SANDLER: You mean no family?

JOHN OPPER: No family. No obligations to anyone except themselves. But away from New York, I constantly felt that I was far away from everything. That I was out of it; that things were happening that I should be very much a part of, and that I think I could have been a part of had I been in New York. Because, you know, there are so many artists in New York. If you're out of New York you're out of them.

IRVING SANDLER: You have actually had it in a sense—even though you were out—you were really closer than 99.9 percent of the teachers teaching out of New York.

JOHN OPPER: Yes. It was very funny that my work was so close to the New York School that when I finally did get back to New York and showed at the Egan in 1955 – it was just before Egan closed up – the review in describing my work, I don't remember the exact words, but he did say that here is a very capable artist in the New York abstract expressionist school; and here I had absolutely no contact with it except as I'd come in occasionally, and except that I'd stemmed from the same roots. That was my contact, you see, my roots were the same. But I was called a New York abstract expressionist, although during this whole period I had not been living in New York at all. And I don't think the reproductions that I saw did anything to me. Oh, I suppose they did in that I was aware of the work that was going on. And I was aware of de Kooning, and Kline, and Mc Neil's work, Cavalon, Tworkov, many of the artists because I knew them personally. I knew what they were doing. But my work I think was a little different from theirs. The work I was doing was very much similar to what I showed—

IRVING SANDLER: In Provincetown – the green pictures—

JOHN OPPER: Yes. The green pictures with sort of –

IRVING SANDLER: Painterly.

JOHN OPPER: Well, it was painterly, yes. It was very painterly in quality. It was no more that a flat surface at the time. Tow-dimensional surface. But most of my forms were pushed from the side, either coming out of the corner or pushing from the side. That happened to be my special interest at the time. I don't know why. Although I think I know why: it was my reaction to the idea that the painting had to be contained with in a—

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. In other words, the forms came in off the edge?

JOHN OPPER: Yes. Off the edge. And – well, I suppose it depends upon how you look at it. I always thought of them as pulling away from the canvas. But these very same shapes, you know, I later did

– not the same but the same idea, they became a little more complex and flatter where I began to eliminate the painterly quality. An my purpose in doing that I think was I began to feel that painterliness in a painting was very much like a virtuoso pianist who has ta great flair in style. It began to be a kind of – and I couldn't accept it – a way of getting the observer to look at your painting, to show off how well you painted, or how well you made your brush strokes.

IRVING SANDLER: In a sense you were reacting against mannerism? Did you feel that too much of the kind of painting that was done, say, after de Kooning had just turned into sort of virtuoso painting?

JOHN OPPER: I thought that, yes. I thought that some of the things that – yes, individual styles became the – I don't mean the individuality of the artist, of course – I mean his little devices that attract people, the observer and the critic. It was very interesting that years later Reinhardt, who was always a very articulate guy—some of the things he said, although I think he said it in a kind of jest—But when he spoke of no technique, actually I could understand what he meant because that's what I was trying to do. I was trying to paint a painting where you would not be aware of the painterliness, you would not be aware of the unusual – anything about that painting except the painting. And this is I think the absence of anything that had a flair or that showed a certain kind of competency of technique.

IRVING SANDLER: Those were those big paintings that had the kindof sawtooth forms?

JOHN OPPER: That was the beginning of them, the interlocking shapes.

IRVING SANDLER: Do you remember when you began those?

JOHN OPPER: Well, I started playing with the idea in 1956 after my show at Egan. But actually I did not work seriously on those until about 1958, 1957 – 1958. And then I showed at the Stable in 1959.

IRVING SANDLER: In 1959, that's right.

JOHN OPPER: I didn't show any of those. Because the first things I showed were very much related to the ones I showed in Provincetown. Except that the painterly quality was practically removed. The interplay of color within a surface was almost eliminated. It still wasn't a completely flat surface because I always did like a pulsating kind of surface.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. But it wasn't a brushy surface. It was modulated but none of that—

JOHN OPPER: Modulated, yes, to a very minor degree.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. I remember those.

JOHN OPPER: I still have several paintings of that group. I remember that the Museum of Modern Art was interested in [them] for a while. They had it for about a year and a half. They never did make a decision on it. Again you see it had this funny little shape in the one corner and then this big vast field on the top of it. It was highly simplified and had a great deal of power. It was getting close to hard edge, but it wasn't; it was a soft, kind of modulated edge.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. But it was still entirely different from most of the paintings that were painterly.

JOHN OPPER: Oh, yes. And I think, too, that most of the paintings of that time – I don't know why – tended to be heavy in their mood quality. Usually they were low in key. I painted several paintings that you might call variations of gray. My feeling at that time was to try to create an aesthetic reaction of course, to myself and to an observer with the simplest possible means. And I working in low – key colors it seemed to come across more.

IRVING SANDLER: But the idea of somberness, because I remember the colors—

JOHN OPPER: They were quite somber.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. Did that interest you at all, or was it rather an attempt ot just key down the jazz?

JOHN OPPER: It was mostly that. But it turned out to be say, a moody effect. I did not strive for that. In fact, I was quite surprised when I had my show and it was pointed out to me that in these paintings it seemed as though I must have been depressed.

IRVING SANDLER: Those pictures I remember very well. I don't know if I review that first show of yours.

JOHN OPPER: No, I don't think you did. As a matter of fact, NYU has one small painting in their collection. I think the Psychology Department has it. It's very interesting. The moody thing – I certainly didn't strive for it consciously. I was just playing with these little simple colors to create an aesthetic response. And this painting…A fellow from the Psychology Department saw it and liked it very much. I guess there's something psychological about these grays. Well, they're not gay paintings, but I never thought of them as heavy paintings either. I just thought of them as simplified paintings and I simplified my color, too, for the same reason. It was a period when I tried to get rid of all the gimmicks that I knew would succeed and I arrived at a simpler and more personal expression.

IRVING SANDLER: John, how often did you visit Black Mountain? When you where down there?

JOHN OPPER: Oh, two or three times.

IRVING SANDLER: What was it like?

JOHN OPPER: It was quite a free atmosphere. You see, Burnsville, where I was, was part of the University of North Carolina. It was mostly a women's college. I thought Black Mountain was a very stimulating place. Well, the hippies or yippies or what ever you want to call them were there at the time. You know, they had the long hair. It was sort of anarchist kind of environment. But they were all working, they were all serious students, serious faculty, everyone was interested in what the other people were doing. And yet they did not interfere with anyone. But when I was there it was already having financial difficulties.

IRVING SANDLER: Albers had left? Or was he still there?

JOHN OPPER: Albers was still there. I think he was there that summer. He left afterwards. But the tuition couldn't carry it. And they couldn't get sponsors or grants or anybody to help them meet their financial needs. Cage was the most interesting guy I met at the time. Because I had know of Albers and of his work. And Albers was working very similar to what he later became. At that time he wasn't showing very much. And he certainly wasn't selling. No, I had met Albers earlier. Which is another thing that is interesting. I met Albers when I was out in Wyoming. There was a show at the Museum in Denver and I was in that show. I had a painting, one of the paintings of the mountains,

you know; it was abstract. Kepes was there [also]. And they had a symposium. What they did was take paintings out of the show and everybody had a go at them. Well, for some reason they took my painting. Kepes said that he like many qualities in the painting but it was not hard edge (now these are the things I seem to recall) – that it did not conform to any formalistic relationship. And he said to say that would overlook the expressionistic quality of the panting. And, you know, I always used to think of Albers as a kind of dyed-in-the-wool kind of person who was a purist and anything outside purism he would just completely ignore. Of course I talked to him afterwards and I found him to be a very, very wonderful man. I told him that I had studied with Hofmann years ago. And there again I assumed that they would have been at loggerheads but he spoke very highly of Hofmann, be very respectful of Hofmann, and liked him. The next time I saw Albers was when I had that show at the Stable. He was at Yale at the time. And there was a young sculptor – I don't recall his name – who was going to follow my show.

IRVING SANDLER: Engman?

JOHN OPPER: Engman, that's right. Robert Engman. He was going to follow my show and Albers came in to help him select work or something. And he saw my show. I happened to be there at the time. And he liked it very much. Which made me feel good because I respected his opinion very much. He liked the simplicity of it. He liked the forcefulness of it. Now, I don't know how we got off on that.

IRVING SANDLER: We were at Black Mountain. What was it about Cage that--?

JOHN OPPER: Oh, the interesting thing about Cage. He had a flair for the dramatic, I suppose he still does. At the time he came he was invited by the department head to give a performance in Burnsville, the place I was at in the old high school. Burnsville was in the mountains, you know, and they used to use the high school and some of the Quonset huts that the government had built. But Cage wanted to have his concert in a home in the town. So they did get a woman who had a grand piano. And, well, it was limited to about fifty or sixty people. And Cage did not prepare the piano ahead of time. He had the audience there and he prepared it while they were sitting there. He'd play and then he'd have these long pauses. And traffic would go by and a horn would honk. And at the beginning he told us to listen, that the sound that were surrounding us were also part of his composition, and that we should listen for these in relationship to what he was playing. But the thing that impressed me about Cage was that – well, it was one of the first times that I heard this new idea of art being what people think it is.

IRVING SANDLER: What year was that concert, John?

JOHN OPPER: That concert was in 2955. And I also met Merce Cunningham. H came down I guess to accompany John Cage, just to make the trip I suppose at the same time he was there. Well, the concert of course was a new event. Also there was a composer there. He also worked with prepared piano. No, he didn't work with prepared piano. Henry—

IRVING SANDLER: Krupp?

JOHN OPPER: No. He was much older. And what he would do he would play with one hand he would strum or hold or flatten out a whole series of strings, and play with this. Henry Cowell was his name.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

JOHN OPPER: I sometimes wonder how much Cowell influenced Cage. But I don't think Cowell was interested in developing a new kind of music, a new form of music. I don't think he became so social-minded as Cage did.

IRVING SANDLER: How was that Cage concert received in this little town?

JOHN OPPER: Well—

IRVING SANDLER: Southern people are very polite.

JOHN OPPER: They listened. I don't think any of them really cared a lot about it but they were very polite. And they all said it was nice, you know. On the surface it seemed they certainly did not object to what he was doing. And some of them had heard of John Cage and knew what to expect. Of course I had heard of him before so it didn't come as a shock to me.

IRVING SANDLER: So the guys that you really sort of met at Black Mountain were Cage and Albers?

JOHN OPPER: Cage and Albers were really the ones that I knew. And later I got to meet and know some of their students. And this is very interesting: some of their students were invited to come down to Women's College to see an exhibition and one fellow came and his hair was all wavy and he took his shoes off and walked around the campus barefooted. And this was in 1957 I guess. Oh, yes, now I remember why they came. They came to see the show: I had invited Egan, Guston, McNeil, Kline and Tworkov and they all came down. They really came down on a lark. I had some money to spend; it was an art festival, so I invited them to come down. When I was up in New York I just mentioned it to George and Egan. And George said, "We'll all come." Goeorge had the car so they all piled into his car and they came down. As a matter of fact, I didn't even know that Guston was coming because he came right ahead of them.

IRVING SANDLER: Did they have a panel?

JOHN OPPER: Yes, they had a panel and they didn't hold back anything. Listen, that session with Guston was so wonderful for the people there that they tell me they're still talking about it. They still mention this unique experience they had with the artists they also had their work. You see, we had their work sent down. I think tow paintings form each artist. And a great many people from all over the state came to see the show after the artist had left. It was on for a month. We had a lot of visitors. So it made quite an impression in the different schools in North Carolina. Jimmy Byrnes I think was there also at that time. You know Jimmy Byrnes?

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

JOHN OPPER: Who is at the museum I think in Raleigh – was it Raleigh? – no, not Raleigh; in the capital of the State. Anyway he was at that Museum and he brought people down, also publicized that we had this show. I'm not sure now whether the show went down to his museum after it closed at Women's College. I'm not sure about that. But I vaguely remember that we did send a show to him for a couple of weeks and I think this was part of it.

IRVING SANDLER: Did you meet any of the students then like Rauschenberg?

JOHN OPPER: At Black Mountain?

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

JOHN OPPER: I first met Rauschenberg up in New York. That, I guess, was in 1953. When did Rauschenberg start showing with—

IRVING SANDLER: Egan? About 1953 -1954.

JOHN OPPER: I think it was 1953. I think he had these large collages, painted collages that at the time were something quite different from anything that was being done. And I met him. And the thing that impressed me – of course while he worked in a different medium, used a different combination of mediums – I thought he had a good solid background in art. I wouldn't call it traditional. But he knew what he was doing. And his youth impressed me. Really he looked like a young kid. And he was I guess.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. Do you remember any of the things that were discussed on that panel by Guston or Kline or? Some of the issues that came up?

JOHN OPPER: Well, they didn't speak very much. Actually they just threw it open to the floor. And the usual questions that you get and which I imagine you would still get: "what does it mean?" "What do you see in it?" "What am I supposed to see in it?" "Why is it good?" "Why is it better than--." You know, the same thing that you hear constantly.

IRVING SANDLER: How did they handle those questions?

JOHN OPPER: The most interesting part of the symposium was not the actual symposium itself. I don't know if I got the idea or somebody else – I think I did – that instead of talking out someplace, why not move into the gallery. And the whole group of students were very much interested in this. Not only the art students, the whole student body. The place was packed. They were sitting on top of each other in the gallery. And it was pretty good-sized gallery. And the paintings were around. Of course McNeil and Jack always tried to help students understand what they were attempting to do and didn't go off into little flights of fancy. But Kline was marvelous. He'd start telling little stories of way back. And he'd act it out. And they loved it, you know. Kline always did have a flair for the dramatic. He, I think, was the hit of the day. The questions they asked of Kline – the most obvious one was why did he work in black and white. And one question they asked him was [was] he influenced by the Orientals? You know, what everybody sees in his work.

IRVING SANDLER: That's right.

JOHN OPPER: The Calligraphy. As I recall, Kline said that consciously he was not; if he was influenced, it would be unconsciously. And another question was, what was he trying to do? And that of course was a little more difficult to explain. He practically said if you can't see it, what can I say to tell you. But he did it in a very warm and non-arrogant way.

IRVING SANDLER: What did Guston --?

JOHN OPPER: Guston talked about color.

IRVING SANDLER: Oh, he did?

JOHN OPPER: Yes. At that time he was still painting his impressionistic paintings. And George I think emphasized the power of movement, the force, the dynamics of movements and counter movements. And I think Jack, too, said something of the same nature. I don't really recall. And they even asked Egan as a gallery director what he saw in their work: was it just commercialism and that kind of thing. And I remember Egan saying, "Well, if it's commercialism I'm the poorest man around."

Because he wasn't selling anything. His selling only began after he moved. And Egan just said he thought that these men were extending art beyond the dimensions that we were familiar with.

IRVING SANDLER: John, I have a couple of rather general questions to ask. You've lived through almost forty years or four decades – that would be better – of American art. I just wondered, in general, what your conception of the changes that take place is. What happened, say, from the thiries to the forties, the forties to the fifties, the fifties to the sixties, because tremendous things have happened and changed in American art. I know this is a very difficult question.

JOHN OPPER: Well, actually it's true that I've been painting approximately thirty-five or forty years. But I really became aware of painting in the late thirties. At the time of course I came from the Midwest and the Midwest influence was more or less regionalism. And the biggest surprise to me was to discover that there was such a thing as modern painting being taken seriously. So in the thirties it was the Cubistic emphasis I think. I think you could call it abstract Cubistic movement. That interested many artists, including myself. And then the war came along. After the war we had I think the beginnings of a break with Cubism, with the abstract expressionists, while it still had the overtones I think of the abstract expressionist qualities. Certainly, Pollock's work has a great deal of that. And the whole abstract expressionist movement – the title even is so bread and it takes in so many different kinds of paintings that it's almost impossible to even think of it without beginning to speak of certain artists.

IRVING SANDLER: In general there was a reaction against the Cubism, abstract and otherwise in the forties.

JOHN OPPER: Yes. I think this is the general feeling. In the thirties it was Cubism. In the forties I think you had the reaction against Cubism. I know I felt this way and I'm sure other artists did too. Well, Cubism, as you well know, not only abstracted shape but it added very litt to color. And even the shape did not go to far. Now in the late thirties we became aware of men like the purist Mondrian who went further away from the abstract shape and began to develop a completely geometric or new language almost in art. But the thing that did not happen I think until even in to the forties while the shapes would sometimes be quite drastic from what they had been before, the color did not change. Color was still very much in the traditional vein. If you only looked at color it did not differ too much from the late 19th century painters. Even the Fauvists while it was a more arbitrary use of color. And this always bothered me because I felt that if you change a form, a shape, and it departs from nature so that nature is lost, then it would follow that color should do the same. Your color should also be unique. Of course it's much more difficult I think to work – to do that with color. I think maybe today they're beginning to do it more. I think George is quite right when he says that maybe one of the great things that is happening at this time is that the abstract color is catching up with the abstract shape.

IRVING SANDLER: That's George McNeil?

JOHN OPPER: When he spoke that night he implied that. He really didn't say – I don't think he said it but he implied it to me. And I think it's quite true that this is what is happening. Most of the young people that I see are using these what you might call abstract colors, psychedelic colors. But they're using it in a representational manner. Which again is a swing back. We did the form and couldn't manage to get the color, they get the color but they're going back to the old form.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. But when you're talking about this new color you mean in the fifties people like yourself and Rothko – would you include him?

JOHN OPPER: Well, I think in the fifties Rothko, yes, Rothko began to do it. I think I try to do it in my work. I think McNeil was trying to do it. And certainly de Kooning. One of the things that impressed me very much about de Kooning's work when I first saw it (and I did not know de Kooning) I got the impression that he painted as though he was color blind. He had those strange relationships that I've noticed color blind. He had those strange relationships that I've noticed color blind students sometimes use, yellows and the constant use of dissonance rather than harmonizing color. And this impressed me a great deal in his work. And of course I think one of de Kooning's greatest qualities is his ability to use a dissonant color and a dissonant form at the same time. He was one of the few people that could do that. In the sixties – at the beginning I thought perhaps young artists trying to find themselves in what they were doing had very little validity. I didn't think of it as –

IRVING SANDLER: You mean things like Pop, Op?

JOHN OPPER: But I think part of that—I think the sixties is a period where if it has any great value —It's value is in opening up new concepts, new directions. I must admit that it's often disturbing to me because of my background. The thing about the sixties perhaps that we get away from is that sometimes – one thing I found I'm in disagreement with Robert Morris about was that he implied that art is anything the people think it is. Or you might say art is what you can get away with. Now I don't really think that is – that to me is a little – he probably doesn't mean that because when I see some of his things I feel he certainly is very conscious of the aesthetic merits of a form and of a line, and a shape. But some of his things I think are just a put-on.

IRVING SANDLER: This is the next question I really wanted to get down.

[END OF TAPE 3 – SIDE 1]
[TAPE 3 – SIDE 2]

IRVING SANDLER: This is the second side of the third interview with John Opper. John, this raises the whole problem of quality and a couple of things that you said before made me raise certain questions in my mind. For example, at one point you reacted against the virtuoso and so called action painting. And yet you always held on to a concept of quality. Now how do you define that term?

JOHN OPPER: Quality?

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. What does it mean to you in painting?

JOHN OPPER: It seems to me in painting – of course it's a very difficult question to answer because it's quit obvious you can't – there's no fixed answer to it. Quality to me is the ability to use the means a painter works with and to create an aesthetic response, an artistic response. My position on painting where I differ with so many painters, some of whom are good close friends, is I think painting is concerned with painting. And anything else it does is using painting to express whatever the artist is trying to do. It's a means rather than the end in itself. I think painting is an end in itself. And I'm interested only in the end itself. So a qualitative thing is the way the colors, lines, forms, shapes break up the canvas. Or a shape. Anything. Now I've often thought about whether my thinking is limited or confined to my background. I suppose it is. But then it seems to me that the whole tradition of any area has its roots in its background, in its tradition.

Why is it possible to look at works of art of other civilizations, (and we know nothing about their civilization), and be able to distinguish certain things as being beautiful and having considerable artistic merit, and others not? There is a quality – it may be nebulous, yes – but there is a quality

that is found in all works of art, even if it's not done as a work of art. You see I contradict myself. It seems to me there are many areas today where we have …Well, for example, take arithmetic and mathematics. Arithmetic is very practical. It's part of mathematics. It's being used all the time. But when you get to higher mathematics in order to be an Einstein – even Einstein had to work from other formulas in mathematics that came before him. I feel the same thing is true in the arts. Or to use another analogy, in music, for example. I very much like folk music and rock music; I find that it is great for what it is. But, after all, I cannot see that it can really push…There are exceptions I'll admit, who are really gifted musicians. But it takes a tradition. I don't see how anybody can really compose anything great – a Mahler, for example – or come up with a vital great thing unless he works at it. It doesn't happen so quickly. It takes sweat and blood and a great deal of knowledge of what has gone on before. I think one of my criticisms, feelings about the things of the sixties is that too often what they do is based on the premise that art never existed before, that there is no tradition. Which to me is nonsense. Well, take the theatre. Now there are many things I've seen in the theatre that I've found very interesting but I thought it was just that they got away with it; and therefore it's good, I guess. I'm thinking of "Futz" for example. I had no reaction – I saw it. If it was a happening I'd think—

IRVING SANDLER: But is this quality something that's in the expression? Or can you actually discuss it in terms of the form.

JOHN OPPER: I think we can discuss it. It's in the expression and also in the form.

IRVING SANDLER: This came up when you talked about Kepes and Albers where, if I read you right, Kepes found things in the pictures that he didn't feel were quite right. And Albers said that this is an expressionist picture with that tradition and you can't look for quality in that way.

JOHN OPPER: Well, you see, Kepes was much more structured in his thinking. I would have thought that Albers would be the one, you know, with his way of thinking, way of painting, where certain relationships are followed in creating a painting. And my way of painting has really never been – it's not conceptual, if you know what I mean? Of course I have ideas and I know where I'm going. But I don't rationalize my paintings as I paint. The rationalization probably comes afterwards. In other words, I'll do something and either accept it or reject it once it's down on the canvas. Kepes' position I think is that he has everything carefully planned out beforehand. He's probably one of the first conceptual painters. He knew where he was going. In that sense he would say that this shape – and there again you see – a shape would be larger because of this other shape is this size. Of course, that I think is still hokum because – (yes, he did mention that in the article that certain forms seem to come forward and other forms seem to recede.) And according to the painting the reverse should happen. Well, I felt, and I think Albers supported the idea, that this is kind of like program notes. You condition a person how to see. I was opposed to the idea that warm colors are supposed to come forward and cool colors recede. This is something I think we're conditioned to see. But it all depends on how you do it. It's possible for the reverse to happen. It was that kind of a criticism. And very analytical kind of criticism.

IRVING SANDLER: But you would be opposed to that kind of criticism.

JOHN OPPER: Yes.

IRVING SANDLER: However, what kind of criticism might one give in terms of quality? If you say well that is not a good painting or that is a good painting would you be able to establish any criteria?

JOHN OPPER: The only criteria I start from, first of all, is the total painting. It seems to me the total

painting takes everything that's within that painting. And that is the basis for criticizing a painting. Now if I see a painting which is a very geometrical structured form and the painting takes on a personality that says I am a structured painting and there's something in that painting, well, if there is a great deal of something that seems to be foreign to it, that seem to set up a dichotomy within the painting, I'll say that seems to me perhaps to be a fault rather than a part of the painting. I think that's one of the things too, that maybe I do not accept among the painters of the sixties who are able to workout a perfect structured plan.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes. An idea.

JOHN OPPER: The idea art. Because it seems to me that art often lies in the deviating from the idea. It's that little deviation that makes it. Otherwise it becomes a, you know…It's true that doing a blueprint of a building can be an artistic-looking thing. But the fact is in a painting what the artist usually does either consciously or unconsciously is something that is not what the scheme calls for. And I'm always aware of that. And sometimes a painting is made by this very quality that should not be made. Well, the same thing in color, for example – of course I'm working with advanced students and I do not regard tem when I speak them as students but as though they were painters. Many of them are painters who have been painting for a long time. And I don't try to talk down to them. Quality to me would be that if your takes on a certain quality, a certain freshness, a certain unusualness, your forms should be related to it. There needs to be this constant integration. You can't have one without having the other work together with it. I remember on of the students showed he painting to McNeil. He thought it had a little more original color…still working with the figure. Had I been criticizing the painting I would have said the same thing but I would have gone further and said that the figure need to have the same kind of distortion as the color did to really come to its full birth or whatever it is that happens to a painting.

IRVING SANDLER: This raises a new order of questions, John. You know the role of education in art. And I thought I would go into this with you a little. How can artists be trained? Can they be trained? Or what is the role of education in the creation of an artist?

JOHN OPPER: Well, to begin with I don't think you can really – well, it all depends on what you mean by the word "training."

IRVING SANDLER: Well, let's take our – you know we're a School of Education here at NYU.

JOHN OPPER: It is possible in that sense, yes. They can be trained if we create the kind of environment that makes this – not only the faculty but the student body becomes one, where they kind of live and see and breathe the various artistic things that are going on. Then I think you can train, yes. With the exception of a very few people it is possible for them to go in to their own little room and do it. You know, one doesn't need to have to become an educated man by going to a university. You can do that at home very easily. The books are available. In the same sense that a good educational environment makes it possible and stimulates students to go on, or to make them aware of some of their hang-ups sometimes. I think that's one of the functions of a good school can do, that a teacher can do. It's not that he really makes the artist. But he kind of directs and kind of guides, and even sets up problems. Makes it tough for the student sometimes. And also sometimes a good student can go along and become very successful in doing a certain kind of painting and the teacher will come along and say, "Well, boy, you've done it. Now what?" And that can be a terrible shock, you know.

IRVING SANDLER: Or maybe to put the question another way: what can actually be taught in a studio class?

JOHN OPPER: In a studio class? Well, the level of most of our students that we get is still concerted with technical problems. So I suppose with your experience and the experience of others you can help them in overcoming their technical – only help them, because they have to do it themselves. I think too you can create – well, I believe an attitude about what art should be or what art is about. I think that is the most important function of a school. In a School of Education I think perhaps that's it. Not the creation of the artist. Because we're not a professional school. Maybe we shouldn't be one. I'm not so sure we should be a professional school. But I think perhaps our greatest task is to – I think it would be a terrible loss to society if we ever get to the point where we do not get a thrill from a poem, let's say, or from something that moves deeply your inward feelings. And I think maybe that's the function of the art teacher.

IRVING SANDLER: Sort of sensitize the student or cultivate sensibility?

JOHN OPPER: Yes.

IRVING SANDLER: Another problem that's come up often in the education of artists is the role that the art teacher takes. For example, George McNeil takes a very approach to his teaching. He will only teach students whose approach is similar to his. There are other teachers who, you know, can easily teach students no matter what kind of painting they're doing and feel that every teacher of art ought to be able to deal with any kind of painting. What's your feeling there? Are you sympathetic with George's narrowness?

JOHN OPPER: George has probably thought this way all the time. George always avoided teaching painting. For many years he was an art historian. And that's what he did. Well, does an artist teach the kind of work he's involved with? I think probably there's an awful lot of truth in that. However, my personal feeling – perhaps I'm more objective when I get away from my work than I am having students work the way I do. I prefer to see students work who do not paint the way I do. Because then I can talk with them because I don't have the same hang-ups. On the other hand what occurs to me is: is it possible to give the student a real feeling of depth and quality if you're not really involved. I think it is. Well, let me say this: you can never really get away from your own work. I'm aware of it and I try to make my students aware of it, that any criticism that I make is a painter who's had certain experiences and paints a certain way. However, I paint my way, but there are painters who paint entirely differently from they way I do and I have admiration and respect for their work.

I see what I see in their work and what they're striving for. I think every artist after a while kind of sets his own limitations because art like everything else becomes specialized and there are so darn many facets that you get lost. So you begin to narrow your vision, your emphasis rather, in order to get a greater depth in what you're doing, a greater quality in what your doing.

IRVING SANDLER: Have you found that there's a movement of students away from painting and sculpture today, John?

JOHN OPPER: No.

IRVING SANDLER: Say, into the happenings or the intermedia or –

JOHN OPPER: At one time a few years back, was it three or four years ago, there seemed to be quite an interest in – well, towards a happening. But I find more and more the students are coming and they're seeking what you might even call traditional education. This does not mean that many of them don't begin to work in more contemporary style or manner. They do. But they do realize

that –Here's one example: I had a young man who painted – it's hard-edge painting and very simply done, and he's technically quite good, you know, and everything he does comes out looking technically well and is very pleasing to the eye – and the criticism that –and by they way, the students, too, their criticism too, they felt that they liked it but beyond that they can't go. And the students are seeking depth in their work. It seems to me that no longer is it enough for them after they find that they're capable of doing something that's successful. It isn't enough for them. They want to do something that has more depth in it, more quality to it. And I find them becoming more and more interested in the painting of past eras. That does not mean that they're also dismissing the things around them. They're very much aware of what's going on. I think what's happening now, at least I think it's happening with students, is that they're beginning to feel that perhaps whatever comes out of art is going to be a result of what's going on plus what has gone on. I have a young man, for example, and he's a very capable painter, might say that he has a good sense of design, a good sense of color, a good sense of proportion. He'd paint on a canvas. And usually it would be a suit of underwear. And then he'd cut it out. And he did this for a whole semester. He'd hang it up on criticism day with a couple of thumb tacks and let the thing hang like underwear. It was a very interesting idea. But now he tells me that he's had it. That it isn't enough. He said, "I wanted to do it, I had an idea to do something." He was even rebelling against the contemporary minimal thing.

IRVING SANDLER: Yes.

JOHN OPPER: It was his own way of finding something—hell, I'll just do underwear. It would be long winter underwear with the drop door open and there would be anything in there, there might be a TV set. Well the last time I saw him he said he did that because he felt he had to get away from things that were being done. But to answer your question I think most students are seeking of a more hard background.

IRVING SANDLER: Another problem which is also being discussed quite a bit is the weight that ought to be given in the training of an artist to a liberal education as against a studio education. This has become particularly sharp in the last couple of years because of the Studio School, you know, which is devoted entirely, or almost entirely to studio as against, say, the setup at New York University where a student is required to have a very broad liberal education as well. Which would you prefer? Which do you think is more valuable to the making of an artist, or the training of an artist?

JOHN OPPER: Well, of course, we could generalize here. It depends on the individual. I think a good serious student who wants to be an artist probably does not need intellectual reward and will seek out the various things that they get in a basic course. However, I often feel what's the rush? It seems to me that what is true in other areas may also be true in art. I'm pretty certain that most people getting into art school – I'm not thinking so much of art students who've painted for a long time – I really don't know what they want. They're not adolescents and they're not adults and they're kind of lost and actually they need a period of just growing up for a couple of years. I think that a couple of years spent may well be spent in liberal arts were they are taking some – where they normally would not do that. I don't know – I would like to know a little more about science, a little more about some of these other areas. And if I had been forced to do it I probably would have. When I look back on my own experience some of the things that I learned I didn't want to do, either my teacher or my mother made me do. And this might help and I new it. And I do remember some of it. And I do find that it's something that I would not have gotten. So, there's something to be said on both sides. You can take another tangent of course. I suppose an artist doesn't have to go to school at all. He doesn't have to go to any school. Many artists go through a liberal arts education without ever touching art and suddenly become an artist.

It's particularly happening to day where they're so – well, I think it has to do with the fact that we're becoming more aware today that art is many, many things, not only sculpture and painting. I think this has happened. I remember as a high school student I was very much impressed by these mathematical string designs that they used to make to so an equation, how a mathematical equation works out—in a physical object. And they were beautiful things. There's no question about it. And I think they are art objects. I think we're getting to the point where we're going to have to separate – the category is getting so bread that it's getting to be almost meaningless. We going to have to talk about one kind of art or we're going to have to talk about another kind of art. I don't believe, for example, that easel painting is dead as long as there are walls.

IRVING SANDLER: It will exist.

JOHN OPPER: As long as people are going to be people they're going to want something to look at instead of bare walls – and it may become quite different from what I know – it may be neon lights. It could be that. I doubt it very much, but there again I could be showing my limitations because I can't get too excited about it no matter how beautiful the neon lights are entwined. Maybe my background is showing.

IRVING SANDLER: This is the end of the third interview with John Opper.

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