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Oral history interview with Aaron Siskind,
1982 September 28-October 2

Funding was provided by the Mark Rothko Foundation. Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Aaron Siskind on September 28 and October 2, 1982. The interview took place at his studio in New York, New York, and was conducted by Barbara Shikler as part of the Mark Rothko and His Times Oral History Project for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Funding was provided by the Mark Rothko Foundation.

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

Interview

BARBARA SHIKLER: Tuesday, September 28th, interview in the New York Studio, with Aaron Siskind, 876 Broadway. Let's begin at the beginning, if you would, although you have been over this ground many times before. Your date of birth is December 4, 1902. And, in New York City.

AARON SISKIND: Right. Right.

MS. SHIKLER: Whereabouts in New York City?

MR. SISKIND: The Lower East Side, way down. I think it was on Madison Street that I was born. And my parents had come over from Russia about 1890.

MS. SHIKLER: Whereabouts in Russia?

MR. SISKIND: Some little town near Kiev, the kind of town, maybe the very town that Sholom Aleichem sets his stories. I know more about my parents from Sholom Aleichem than I do from them I think. And that was when all of the Jews were coming over from Russia and Poland, you know, I think more than a million came during that decade. And they would come over and I guess when my parents came they stayed with some people from their town who were already here. And I could remember even when I was 3 and 4 years old, people coming and staying at our place which was a little apartment behind this tailor shop. And they would stay for a week or two until they found their own place.

MS. SHIKLER: Let's pause for a moment.

[Back on record]

MS. SHIKLER: You spoke about your father's shop and I gather that he was the proprietor of a series of shops. How did he -

MR. SISKIND: Where did you get this from?

MS. SHIKLER: Oh, one of the books I have been reading on you, one of the introductions to one of -

MR. SISKIND: Yeah. He was the kind of man who for whatever reason couldn't accommodate himself to the shop - you know working in a big shop - so he opened his own. I guess maybe he had ambitions and he opened his own little tailor shop, a neighborhood shop. You know, he repaired, ironed and pressed clothes and that kind of stuff. And he did that for his entire life until I guess, oh maybe 20 years before he died, when he became sort of blind so he couldn't work. But he was a very restless man. He would get a shop and own it for a while and for some reason or another he would sell it and find another one some-where else. I don't think he ever sold a shop knowing that he was going to buy another one. It's just that it either ran down on him or some reason, I don't know what. But he would sell it and then look around and buy another shop. And then that moved us, you see, from the lower East side to the West side in the 40's, and then to way up on Amsterdam Avenue in a house, 1492 was the address and that is where we lived for a long time. But I remember while we lived there he must have had three or four different shops. And then he just stopped working because he couldn't see very well.

MS. SHIKLER: He seemed always to have enough cash to buy another shop?

MR. SISKIND: Well, he would sell one, and then buy another. My mother was the one that always came forth with the money. It all went to her and she would put it in a box or a pouch and you know, put it behind the piano or something. My mother was a very bright woman but completely illiterate. She never went to school in her life. Her parents died when she was a child, maybe four or five years old. She worked -- they both just worked, never took a vacation -

MS. SHIKLER: Were you ever involved in working in the shop?

MR. SISKIND: No, I was just - when I went to school I remember I would sometimes come and stay with my father, you know, take a book to read and so forth. And he would be at the shop until 9:00 o'clock or so and I would sit there.

MS. SHIKLER: You were close with your parents?

MR. SISKIND: Well, my relation to my parents was not very meaningful, even right from the start. That is, that it didn't satisfy me. I never had any real emotional attachment and certainly no intellectual relationship with them - right from the start I was a street child. My parents were very nice people, don't get me wrong, but for some reason or another, it wasn't enough for me. So, right from the start, because they were always working, my father was working and my mother was taking care of the children, she had five children. I took to the street all the time. I was the kind of person who was just curious. As a youngster I was bright -- things changed later on [laughter] and -

MS. SHIKLER: Which one were you of those five?

MR. SISKIND: I was next to the last. She had one other child after me.

MS. SHIKLER: Was anyone else from the family interested in - well, before I even ask you that, when did your interest begin to -

MR. SISKIND: Well, I was intellectually alert right from the very start and when I was like - to give you an example, when I was I think 11 or 12 years old, you could on a certain evening find me speaking on a soap box at 137th Street and Broadway. I was just imitating other people - you know, socialists. Used to have meetings every Tuesday and somebody else would have a meeting every Friday and -

MS. SHIKLER: How did you find out about things like that?

MR. SISKIND: I was outside all the time. I can remember even when I was like three or four years old my parents pulling me from under a bench in Madison Park where there was a concert going on, and I would go under the bench - I was miniature - I was very tiny - and they would find me and drag me home. I have all memories of my doings when I was a little child. And that continued. I was always out in the street guilty as could be, playing you know. At certain times there was a gang of boys who used to play ball and other things. But later on I would just go out and listen to the people making speeches on the street. See, this is before radio was much of a force you know, and so I wanted to do the same thing and so I did - there was another boy and myself together for a while and then I by myself. I remember even a fellow called Murray Holbert, who I think was a president of the Board of Alderman, picking me up and I made some speeches for him. You know, there was this little fellow getting up there and talking as though he knew all the answers and I would get mobs of people, you know? And, I would have to shout because they didn't have any microphones. I remember once making a speech at 125th Street and Seventh Avenue. I was pulled into the police station because I was blocking traffic.

MS. SHIKLER: Did you just set yourself up there and begin your speech?

MR. SISKIND: Yeah, I just went there.

MS. SHIKLER: Do you remember what you were talking about?

MR. SISKIND: Anything that was in the - you know, just before the war began we were talking against war and for peace. You know, whatever I heard I guess. I listened to the Socialists make speeches - so I was in favor of this or not in favor of that -

MS. SHIKLER: Well, was it political conviction on your part or a sense of performance?

MR. SISKIND: Well I am sure as far as I knew it was conviction but I think it was a great need to project myself. Apparently I didn't have it at home so I had to find it outside. You know, that is my interpretation of it. I don't know what other forces were operating. You know, then later on I joined what we called the Junior Yipso's, a Young People's Society and I became a leader and I was very active.

MS. SHIKLER: How old were you then?

MS. SHIKLER: I was probably 12 or 13 years old. And my life went on that way. Later on, I dropped my interest in all that and became interested in poetry.

MS. SHIKLER: That is what I wanted to ask you about. That sort of happened around the time that you went to City College [New York, NY], is that correct?

MR. SISKIND: Before, before.

MS. SHIKLER: Before. How did that evolve? How did you become involved in that?

MR. SISKIND: Well, I had a wonderful teacher, a fella called La Pala, Garabaldi La Pola. He was a wonderful guy and he just inspired me. It was the beginning of the poetic renaissance in United States. We worked from Louis Untermeyer's *Anthology* and he used to read to us and he became like a father to me.

MS. SHIKLER: Who did you like? What poet?

MR. SISKIND: Oh, all poets at that time. Vachel Lindsey, Louis Untermeyer himself - oh, let's see, I think it was that it was not until a little bit later that I became interested, in college, in people like T. S. Eliot and Pound. In high school it was nothing serious. It was just that I was changing very rapidly from being a child to being a man and my whole system became different. You know, I got so I couldn't play ball anymore very well, and when I was 12 and 13 I was a phenomenal ball player. You know? I was very quick. I couldn't hit the ball far but I could catch any ball anywhere, I was so fast. And then I guess I began to change physically and that's when I became interested in poetry.

MS. SHIKLER: Did that upset you that you were losing your coordination?

MR. SISKIND: Well, you know, it didn't bother me. It's just that I did other things, that's all. And I didn't really lose my coordination, I just lost that phenomenal skill. And so I became interested in poetry and then I got interested in music, used to go to concerts and I studied the piano for quite a few years and I worked hard at it but I could never coordinate my eyes you know? And at City College we had a Literary Society and I wrote poetry for them and they published my poems and I think they even gave me a medal once. And that is where I first knew Barney Newman but of course he wasn't painting then. We had one painter in the group who came along who used to meet us after the meeting and that was Adolph Gottlieb and I got to know him and because they were also interested in painting I used to go along once in a while to the shows on 57th Street.

MS. SHIKLER: Did any particular kind of show attract you more than others?

MR. SISKIND: No. I didn't go too often. I just really went along. See, they knew much more about art and they were friends of Adolph Gottlieb who was a serious painter even then, although he wasn't showing yet. And actually, as a matter of fact, he painted a portrait of me way back then in the early '30's, and some former student of mine who teaches in New Mexico just sent me a little note saying that he saw a show of Gottlieb's that included that portrait. [Laughter.]

MS. SHIKLER: Who were some of your teachers there at City College? It was such a lush place at that time culturally.

MR. SISKIND: Generally the teachers were not very important. The only teachers we did have any kind of contact with but I never did personally were some of the young men in the Physics Department. And I am going to ask you not to smoke because it is affecting me -

MS. SHIKLER: Oh sure.

MR. SISKIND: The fellows in the Physics Department were interested in the new poetry. But the people teaching, I mean we used to - we used to bring in stuff - to show them something. I guess there were some good men there but nobody whom I have heard of since. But it was just the group, you see, that was a big influence on me, because the other fellows were phenomenal readers. I remember getting an illegal copy of *Ulysses* [James Joyce, 1922], a friend of mine brought back from Europe - it had a plain paper, a brown paper cover - and I would lend the fellows *Ulysses* and they would give it back to me the next morning completely read and not only that, but they could quote passages. So, I was living with fellows like that and some of them remained my life long friends.

MS. SHIKLER: Who were some of them besides the two you mentioned?

MR. SISKIND: Well, there were two. One is still alive, a fellow called Leo Herman, and then there is another fellow who became a writer of children's books, and went into politics and so forth, a fellow called William Lipkin, Bill Lipkin. Those were the two that I related to and they became very close friends of mine.

MS. SHIKLER: Had you any indication at that time of an interest in photography?

MR. SISKIND: No, none at all. I was trying to write poetry. My memory never was very good and I find it very difficult writing. I could produce nice little lyrics and things of that sort, but you know it gets frustrating if you are writing something and you can't immediately have the recollection of the previous stanza, something like that. And, when you can't call up words with ease - well, it became sort of painful. But I kept roughing it until I graduated. So there was not very much. I had translated some things.

MS. SHIKLER: From what to what?

MR. SISKIND: Oh, I translated some Middle English, a poem and made a play out of it. Nothing serious.

MS. SHIKLER: What were your poems generally?

MR. SISKIND: Oh, poems about my misery - love - [laughing] things of that sort.

MS. SHIKLER: They were not political though?

MR. SISKIND: No, no, not at all. They were very personal. And my going into photography was completely an accident. I got married in 1929 and I think the next year we went to Bermuda, my wife and I, and a friend of mine gave me a little camera, a tiny little thing, and I began taking pictures. And that, that was such a joy for me to make pictures. I could see a picture immediately, you know? I always was able to make a picture and I got such pleasure out of it. And, it came so easily - so naturally. By that time it was so difficult for me to write a poem, it was such an agony that I abandoned it. I haven't written a poem since. And I kept on taking pictures. I was teaching and I didn't have to do it commercially. When I got out of college I taught in elementary school, see? I wanted to have a job where I would have a little time to write. I was a completely unambitious person.

MS. SHIKLER: What were you teaching?

MR. SISKIND: It was an elementary school, little children.

MS. SHIKLER: Well what -

MR. SISKIND: It was from the 5th grade and it went to the 9th grade -- that was about as far as I got. And I was showing at the [Charles] Egan Gallery [New York, NY] and I was still teaching-

MS. SHIKLER: Well, Egan came in '47 did it not?

MR. SISKIND: Yes, I taught until 1949.

MS. SHIKLER: I wanted to ask you a little bit in between, actually a lot in between because -

MR. SISKIND: [Laughing]

MS. SHIKLER: I know that you taught until 1949 in the elementary schools. Did that gratify you or was it -?

MR. SISKIND: Well, I made it do. I made it do. To kill the monotony and repetition and all that I used to do a lot of things in the school when the opportunity arose. You know, little publications and all. Student Government. I worked with that.

MS. SHIKLER: Where were you living then?

MR. SISKIND: Well, most of the time I taught in the elementary school, I taught at 77th Street and Amsterdam Avenue, the school has since been torn down.

MS. SHIKLER: I live on that block.

MR. SISKIND: Where at 77th?

MS. SHIKLER: Were you living around there then?

MR. SISKIND: Well, I lived in various places. 38th Street and Second Avenue for two years and then we moved up closer to the school. My wife, whom I was married to, finally was working with me in the same school and she could never get up in the morning so we moved a little closer, which meant that she took a cab every morning, you know? Seven or eight blocks - [laughs] - and then we moved up about 106th Street and Riverside Drive. Then eventually we moved downtown to 16th Street between 7th and 8th Avenue.

MS. SHIKLER: Well, during that whole period that you were teaching, you were doing photography I take it as much as you could. Were you developing your own things?

MR. SISKIND: Oh yes. I began to slowly. Slowly I got the equipment to enlarge. I always had an inexpensive camera, and during the '30's, from about '32 on I was a member of the Photo League for many years and so I worked - I used to go down to meetings there and so forth and I would walk out on the street and take pictures - you know, to Harlem, South Street and that area, Wall Street. I would work on weekends. But a great deal of the work I did during that period I did during the summer. That was a glorious period. I would get a couple of months off. I worked on an architectural document of the Vineyard up there.

MS. SHIKLER: Martha's Vineyard. But that was a little bit later wasn't it?

MR. SISKIND: Yes.

MS. SHIKLER: I thought I would ask you - you more or less have been fairly accurately recorded everywhere that you have gone. I know - I know that at the Photo League you attended lectures by Paul Strand and Berenise Abbot.

MR. SISKIND: No, that is not really true. At the Photo League, Paul Strand came to talk once. He impressed me very much.

MS. SHIKLER: He did?

MR. SISKIND: I never really felt that his photographs were quite right, you know? I always had reservations about them but I was very much impressed by the posture of the man. He was a sour puss really. But, you know, he stood up there and the way he talked about what he was doing in his photography and all that kind of impressed me enough to say you know, I too want to be a photographer. You can attain to something that was comparable to writing poetry.

MS. SHIKLER: So in a sense that gave you the understanding that you yourself could -

MR. SISKIND: It gave me a moral position. That I was looking for. You see, the things I wanted to do most in my life were things that were accepted by society and by myself as being - what can I say - containing the possibilities that a human being can aspire to. But I was a little skeptical about photography when I began to do it you know? I didn't know whether I could grow in it. Whether it had the possibilities of doing what for ages had been done in music and in literature, that kind of thing.

MS. SHIKLER: What you are trying to say is you weren't certain of your place in that tradition rather than questioning the task itself?

MR. SISKIND: Well, I didn't know whether it had a tradition, whether photography had it, whether there was a possible growth there. Something to feed on - to relate to.

MS. SHIKLER: In the field itself rather than you?

MR. SISKIND: Yes, that's right. I didn't know. People around me didn't seem to amount to much. There weren't that many books on photography. You know, there were only a few figures that I could look up to, but I had reservations about all of them. Even Weston, you know, because aesthetically I had become fairly sophisticated through my love of music, I had listened to so much of it. My library, I had a complete, almost a complete collection of English poetry, and here I was listening to a bunch of jerks talking.

MS. SHIKLER: You mean at the League?

MR. SISKIND: Yes

MS. SHIKLER: The socialism and doctrinaire communism?

MR. SISKIND: Yes, the politics, you know. To me it was very shoddy and I was disillusioned about communism, even way back then. Although I had kind of socialistic beliefs you see. So I had to have some kind of reassurance, and this guy Strand is standing there, this guy whose actual work I didn't accept, see? He made me believe that a person could grow in photography and you could say lots of things in it. And it was a very curious kind of situation and it made it easy for me to accept photography that way because I was looking for something. I needed it badly because I was such a failure in the things that I had wanted to do. Poetry and then music--for a while I tried to compose music but I was such an utter failure and I had such a need for that. And this goes a way back to the fact that I was a street boy running around. You know it's like the song, the ball-weevils' song - "I'm looking for a home." And then from then on I really went to town. It was the one thing in the world that meant something to me.

MS. SHIKLER: What did you not like about Strand's work?

MR. SISKIND: Well, I thought that his work and what he said about his work were two different things. No cohesion. And so I felt that he didn't really understand what he was doing. I felt that he was basically a pictorialist, but he felt that he was a documentary photographer - or he pretended he was, or said he was. And I felt that his aesthetic was distorted. I had a sense of that and later on I began to feel that even more in his movies. And of course later on the figure of Strand didn't mean very much but by that time I had other people to look at that were more solid - like Walker Evans. I am not making any final aesthetic judgment on Paul Strand. I am just telling you how I felt at that time, you know, and the forces operating within me.

MS. SHIKLER: You made that clear. I don't think you have to worry about that.

MR. SISKIND: I am telling you that from private perspective. So I think at that time my reaction to Paul Strand was a little confused.

MS. SHIKLER: This was from the early thirties I gather. You then I think had gone to the Anderson Galleries, just around then for the first time?

MR. SISKIND: Yes. I had a friend of mine who owned an antique shop on Madison Avenue, a very close friend of mine, actually a friend of mine since high school. And I went to the Anderson Galleries at that time, there was a show of Stieglitz and it kind of impressed me. And then of course, I'd see a show of Margaret Bourk-White and that gave me food for thought, and Berenice Abbot. Then toward the end of the '30's and into the '40's you see by that time I began to look at art too, and I had done some more architectural stories. And so my whole field was broadened by and enlarged -

MS. SHIKLER: I wanted to ask you about that. I have a note here that you exhibited in traveling exhibitions at union halls and the Communist Party headquarters and that sort of thing during that period.

MR. SISKIND: No, that was in the '30's and we produced work and sent it around sometimes.

MS. SHIKLER: Now out of that came some of the documentaries that you have done such as the Harlem Document?

MR. SISKIND: Yes, in 1936 I organized a group of young photographers.

MS. SHIKLER: The Feature Group, was that it?

MR. SISKIND: Yes, it was called the Feature Group and. we did small features, small documents. We showed those and then later on we worked on the larger documentaries, the Harlem Document.

MS. SHIKLER: Apparently your influences according to some of your many historians because you do have them, were Brady, O'Sullivan, Atget, do you want to add to those influences at that time?

MR. SISKIND: You know, I am really not clear about the influences to tell you the truth. Sometimes I remember that I would see something or relate to something and I don't know - I mean I really don't know. I just - like for instance, I am sure that Walker Evans must have influenced me very, very much because there is so much about him that is admirable. And I know that I saw his pictures. And when I first started to make pictures they were of the same kind of subject matter. So you know, at the same time, I had so many reservations about all these people, about what they were going to do and so on, and I see that one after the other, my reservations sometimes are rewarded by evidence of truth. You know, for instance, I had reservations about the motivations say of Walker Evans. And because of that, I find out that - a lot of people all talk about his being a photographer, a documentary photographer and being interested in social things like that. And it turns out that it was altogether untrue. From him I get it. And also I find that a lot of these guys, they die. They work for a few years and then they die. Like Robert Frank? They die. And then I finally see some guys who don't die. See? These guys, guys like Harry Callahan or Fred Sumner, they keep growing, and growing. And I said there must be something wrong in terms of art with these guys. I mean Walker Evans did all his pictures in a few days and then he just kept on treading water you know? And that renewed my faith in the fact that you will have to, no matter what you are doing, no matter how radical it is, you have got to be rooted in tradition. I mean, that is where we get our ideas from - from other artists. Like every artist knows, you know? You don't come up and say -- hey, I am new. And so I had that point of view see? About the, what I call the community of artists, which extends over time and over places. How you need each other, how you get courage from each other, and ideas and don't be ashamed of it and don't hide it. You know? Whenever I talk to students, and I get a chance to talk to them off and on, when they show my [inaudible] they wonder why is this guy you know talking about Franz Kline, why doesn't he talk about himself? And I try to explain to them how I think it flows from one to the other, back and forth and all that, that you young people all want to be unique, you know? You are unique whether you want to be or not. You can't help that. But, are you rich? Are you meaningful? And I think that these guys have had it, or they were rooted in thin soil or the soil they were rooted in was not too nourishing. I even believe for instance that a great photographer and a wonderful person, like Edward Weston - If he had been brought up on the East instead of that phony art environment in California, he would have been richer. You know? If he would somehow or another find some tensions to deal with it sometimes you know? Some contradictions. Things like that. But he was out there and he was terrible you know? And then he came over here and made some very gracious and graceful pictures and it's nice to have them.

MS. SHIKLER: There was -

MR. SISKIND: Now that it what my whole relation to art is and it's just - I was able to say that, say that strongly

because - only because my own work became so strong see? And so actually you need that in photography. You know? Photographers do stuff like this you know? It's ridiculous.

MS. SHIKLER: But that followed. And I don't want to jump ahead to that because the period of your growth took place in these years. For instance, after you did the Harlem Document and the Dead End. There are several things relating to that area which I wanted to ask you about. You said, "for something reason there was in me - [and I am reading out certain parts] - the desire to see the world clean and fresh and alive. Documents left me wanting something." And, it was in between those documents and the Martha's Vineyard experience I believe that change began to really grow in you in that time. And do you want to talk about -

MR. SISKIND: Well, I am trying to describe photographic experiences that would change my whole photographic interests. And that has to do with seeing things fresh. And it was just something that came upon me which of course happened to be the kind of idea that the abstract Expressionists have. This was very early. When we do documentary photography you have to - I think I wrote an article about this - you have to plan things you see? Someone does all the research you see? And then you say you are going to do something, to show something and it's kind of a reasonable procedure. And then one summer on the Vineyard I did some things which were activated not by that kind of sensible procedure.

MS. SHIKLER: Are you talking about the Bass Rocks are you?

MR. SISKIND: Well, that is part of it but even earlier than that. I have made a few pictures as I went around. I collected some material and I put them places. Just horsing around, just play, you know, seriously and quietly and I made all these pictures. And then I got back to New York and developed them and I saw a remarkable thing. I saw all these pictures that related to each other formally. And the relation between every picture had a relationship between something organic and something geometric and I began to say my God, you know, this is like the story of my life so to speak, or something symbolic, like a struggle between my emotions, which is very active, and my reason so to speak. This is a fundamental thing. This is marvelous. Look at that? You get absorbed in doing something, you don't intend it, and out of it comes so much meaning. Gee, I am going to try this more. The pictures I made weren't very interesting you know. And that is what I had to find out. To take pictures that mean something like that, personal and universal at the same time. I had the pictorial interest and that was seeing the world. You know, you don't plan. You just go somewhere and just stand still. And things come together for you. And that is really I found out later is the way some of the abstract expressionist artists were working. They like to start with nothing. I remember years ago Adolph said that. He said when I sit down, my mind is blank. Although you are not blank but it's very impressionable. And you are not directly or consciously. You know, a guy like Reinhardt would take a canvas and he would sit down in front of that canvas for a while and some-where a decision came to make a mark. Once you made a mark you keep going and I was working the same way. You know? And that is why I could get so much from them when I met them later on. And of course, I could enrich that and get ideas from this too. So that is all I was saying there. It's enough.

MS. SHIKLER: It's fascinating. So much like the way historians write about history. How things happen that appeared to be related and they are happening separately but they all are achieving a kind of a wave-like effect on time. And, that is what happens with you and those fellows. Apparently though from what I can see, the great change, the visible change took place around that Tabernacle City.

MR. SISKIND: There I was working personally but I was still a novice. I started photography and I progressed very slowly in 1932, and that is how I learned. The Tabernacle City thing, where I found a community, this place which was practically empty because it was depression and most of the houses were for rent or for sale, and I satisfied my great desire for formal relationships.

MS. SHIKLER: Was that the first time that you had that experience, in which the formal relationships impressed themselves upon you?

MR. SISKIND: Yes, and then of course the problem was to make it interesting and to get the autumn into the fall.

MS. SHIKLER: Do you remember when it was that you had that experience that you were describing a moment ago in Martha's Vineyard?

MR. SISKIND: Yes, that was in the - let's see, oh maybe 1941 or '42 something like that.

MS. SHIKLER: I have been reading a little bit about the way in which people perceive you and your influences. Someone has written that your documentary experience remained at the core of your sensibility in that. He speaks of an accrual of imagery, one picture informing the other, in much the same way documentaries arrive at the truth through the accumulation of evidence. Are you in accord with some of these things that are being said about you?

MR. SISKIND: I never read that. I don't remember having read that.

MS. SHIKLER: Well, I put together a few -

[Off record]

[Back on record]

MS. SHIKLER: This is Side II of the first interview with Aaron Siskind. We were talking about Tom Hess's commentary on Aaron Siskind's work and the way in which documentaries arrive at a truth and this experience was part of his approach with later photographs. And I think that is about to be refuted to some extent.

MR. SISKIND: Well, I think what he was doing there was relating the work I did as a documentary photographer with my later work and the relationship he found there was that I was - he found that I was working what he called "series" of pictures. This was later on, when he wanted to ask me what I was working in series and so forth. And he relates it to the way in which a documentary photographer accumulates evidence and I think that there is something to that, you know? Actually, the meaning is altogether different. I think in the documentary photography all you can do is just pile up evidence. But in working as an artist, where you are working in terms of form or that sort, all you are doing is trying to vary the form in some significant way, see? Each picture itself is its own truth you know? There is no accumulation there, or anything of that sort. Besides, at the time I was doing that I had given up all this well, what I consider a false notion of documentary photography. They were revealing the truth. Because for instance the only way you can reveal the truth about some social thing is - I mean you have to do it statistically and you just can't do it in photography because with photography you have to make a choice. So if you want to prove something or what's going on, say you want to prove that the farmers are in a bad way well, you could go out - you know, you could go out and photograph 50 farms that are in ruins but it doesn't prove a damn thing. It just proves that there were 50 farms, and it might be the only 50 farms see? Or, they would be 50 farms taken in a certain way. You might show working farms are in ruins. You could go on and on and all you could do is just arouse people emotionally by looking at certain pictures but as far as the truth is concerned that is absolutely ridiculous.

MS. SHIKLER: Well, when they say that the camera does not lie, perhaps the people who use it -

[Laughter.]

MR. SISKIND: There is a certain relationship between a photographic image and what you know as the reality. There is a difference between a photograph of a person and a painting of a person. We do know that what was photograph was there you see. Do you know what I mean? But when you look at a painting of a person you can't swear that she was wearing a green dress or a blue dress, see? So, there is that relationship to reality and that is what makes it so easy to lie in a photograph, if you believe it to start with. But any sophisticated person knows that it's a translation and you know you can - when you translate there is a matter how you distort with your lenses is a matter of your point of view?

MS. SHIKLER: You said something that I think should perhaps lead us to your relationship with the abstract expressionists. You said - well, before I go on to what you said we seem to be passing right over your experience with the Bass Rocks. Maybe that should be put in here a little bit.

MR. SISKIND: Well it's just an example to show the influence that your art experience has on you, that's all. That is all I was trying to show. You know, the old phrase art against art, and so forth. And I had just had an experience photographing pre-Columbian sculpture, and I had done that for Barney Newman. He was putting on a show with Betty Parsons at the Wakefield Gallery. And the only thing that was significant about that was that I photographed it simply and then when I went back to Gloucester in the summer, and I went out on the Bass Rocks, and it's a whole ledge of rock there right out in the ocean, whereas I had done that the summer before and I just lay there. This time I went back and it was all full of these images, see? And I am sure that I was able to see those images because of my experience with photographing.

MS. SHIKLER: It was kind of an epiphany for you wasn't it? A very emotional discovery of that process, almost as though it seems to me that this sort of thing happens in fact to everyone but unless one is really conscious of the fact that he is being informed by his experience it's a waste, whereas you made contact with that at that point, and you were changed by it?

MR. SISKIND: Yes, I wasn't - yes. Now when I saw these images I didn't relate it immediately to my experience, but when I saw the images and when I began to think about -- why the hell didn't I - where was I last summer? They weren't there last summer and now they are there, and that is the difference. The interceder was the experience of photographing those things.

MS. SHIKLER: So that in effect created a conscious thing within you which then dictated some of your further investigations didn't it?

MR. SISKIND: Right.

MS. SHIKLER: Is it appropriate then to quote this - that you said - "as the language of photography has been extended," etc. etc., and you then went on to speak about that. But, is that part of what you mean? Or no - it isn't part of what you meant in that you weren't referring to things like the rocks, but you apparently feel that photography can be infinitely extended according to your experience, or one's own experience?

MR. SISKIND: In the point of view of your relationship with the world. That is all I am trying to say there is that we are looking at the world a little differently in general than you know we did say 100 years ago. And the difference is that there were certain things that have affected us. Like, this is one of the things that I have talked about, I may have talked about in that speech, was the fact that the way which I explained it was very simple. I said, I can sit here and talk to you, see? I am not only conscious of you, and that I am talking to you, but that damn thing sticking out of your hand, and there is a picture in mind that every once in a while I begin to think about and relate. In other words, we don't think singly. You know, because we are affected by certain kinds of psychological movements. And so that it's very appropriate to make the kind of picture I made which is a picture that has a multiple meanings you know? Which I realize all poems are and this has been going on for ages, we didn't need Freud for this, you know? [Laughter.]

MS. SHIKLER: Well, sometimes there is a question only of naming something that one knows and once having named it you realize that you know it. And I think that is to some extent what you did. Was it during this whole period that you began to inter-relate with the painters? How did that all come about?

MR. SISKIND: Well, I knew a few to begin with see? I knew Adolph and I had had some experience with Rothko. I met him I think - I don't know when, 1938 or 1939. I photographed some of his paintings and - I got to know him, the person, you know, and I began to see some paintings I suppose. Then I explained to you how I came upon a method of working which is very similar to the way some of these painters were working, abstract expressionist painters. But the thing that helped me the most to contact the artist was a show that I had at the Egan Gallery in 1947. Barney Newman whom I knew very well and was interested in my work - as a matter of fact he tried to get Adolph to be interested. And Adolph wouldn't have anything to do with it because it's all made with a machine you know? And he wouldn't even look at it. So anyway, Barney said, why don't we go up to see Charlie Egan and show him your pictures. Maybe he will give you a show.

MS. SHIKLER: Can I interrupt you?

MR. SISKIND: Yes?

MS. SHIKLER: Didn't you show also at the Cooperative Galley that they had on 9th Street? Weren't you the first photographer ever to show with painters? That preceded it a bit did it not?

MR. SISKIND: No that was - see, that show was in 1950.

MS. SHIKLER: Oh, I beg your pardon.

MR. SISKIND: The 9th Street show you are talking about?

MS. SHIKLER: Yes. I thought - I see.

MR. SISKIND: That was 1950 I think.

MS. SHIKLER: Okay, so he said to go up to -

MR. SISKIND: So the pictures that I showed I did in 1949. So these are 1949 pictures.

MS. SHIKLER: Okay.

MR. SISKIND: So I went up to see Charlie and I began to say to him Barney Newman said - and he said, never mind who sent you here. Let me see your pictures. So I had all these little unpretentious pictures of certain things and he looked at about 4 or 5 pictures and he said - let's make a show. Just like that is the way he talked. He said let's make a show. And that was that. Now when I made a show the guys came up to see you know. Pollock was very impressed and a few others.

MS. SHIKLER: Now had the dialogue about what you were doing preceded this attention from them? Had you been talking to them and so on?

MR. SISKIND: No, I may have gone to the - what do you call it - to the Biltmore Cafeteria and I may have been listening in there. I don't remember whether or not that came after. I think maybe I did go there a few times, I don't know. But that is when I got to know some of them. That is when I got to know Franz and a few others.

Rothko I already knew and he was never really interested in my photographs. I don't think he ever came to a show of mine. But Jackson was very impressed by them. They were all very small. The biggest was 11 by 14. They were all mounted on masonite.

MS. SHIKLER: What were they?

MR. SISKIND: This probably was one of them and seaweed pictures I had taken.

MS. SHIKLER: Would you like to identify what you were pointing to when you said "this?"

MR. SISKIND: Oh, this is a picture I did in Gloucester the first year I was there. And actually it was a very abstract picture and I remember thinking of it and calling it, "Symbols of Manscape" which is a kind of fashionable title you know? So I must have been reading things. And I had a very simple triangle and an arrow and I never figured out what that was doing up there. [Laughing]

MS. SHIKLER: What had you in fact photographed?

MR. SISKIND: This?

MS. SHIKLER: Yes.

MR. SISKIND: Oh, this is a piece of tar paper with another piece of tar paper tacked onto it. And then these arrows pointing in different directions fascinated me.

MS. SHIKLER: So that was at Egan and -

MR. SISKIND: And that was the beginning and then I think I had four or five shows at Egan during that period, that period between 1947 and 1953, or '54, something like that.

MS. SHIKLER: What did it feel like to have that show?

MR. SISKIND: It felt real good, it felt very good. I was a very simple guy with very simple means and made very small pictures and had a very limited facility, but I was very glad to have someone look at the picture not for its technical excellence but for a meaning so to speak. And, it must have really surprised a lot of people you know, to show pictures, you see? And it has always given me a feeling that to a large extent a lot of this had a kind of originality. I was a kind of naive; do you know what I mean? They certainly weren't sophisticated but they were certainly of a whole, of a piece, they were related to each other, they were a kind of way of seeing. And they had a kind of you know.-at that time everybody was taking pictures of people. I had one guy, quite an intelligent Communist who I had known in the Photo League and he came to see it. And he said.-he looked at the show and he said, Aaron this is a very handsome show but where are the people? And that was very interesting. I mentioned that to Joe Mitchell who was still on the New Yorker and who writes about people and he said, I can't see that Aaron, he said those pictures are just full of people. I can see them, they touch them, they made them, they discarded them, I mean it's all people. In other words he could see the psychological elements in there. But they were very strange. People had strange reactions. I remember there was girl I had just met and I asked her to come up and see the show and she was a psychologist, a working psychologist. This was all new to her, and as a matter of fact art was kind of new to her and she went around the room at the gallery, Harvey Pickett - did you know that gallery?

MS. SHIKLER: Yes I did.

MR. SISKIND: Oh really? I didn't think that you went back that far.

MS. SHIKLER: I do. As a matter of fact I was working for Charlie Egan's dentist, Jack Greenberg, do you know him?

MR. SISKIND: Really? I know of him but I had never met him. You were working for him?

MS. SHIKLER: Yes, I used to hold down de Kooning's tongue every once in a while [laughs] -

MR. SISKIND: Oh really? Anyway she looked around and she came up to me and said, Aaron, there is no time in these pictures. She felt that they were out of time. That was such a long reality. They were very interesting comments.

MS. SHIKLER: Interesting comments.

MR. SISKIND: But you knew that you had something that was affecting people. They weren't just pictures, there was some kind of content in there, see? And this content was not particularly the content that you saw but it was

the content of the guy, you know, who put it there, the way the picture was made as pertained to the way a picture is made and perceived and felt, you know? And that was very interesting to me.

MS. SHIKLER: Did you know that when you were doing them? Were you just going on a kind of creative flow or were you thinking of -

MR. SISKIND: Oh no. I just knew that there was something going on. I explained that once, someone asked me that same kind of question and I said I knew that there must be something going on there because in the first place I wasn't predetermining a location, a picture, the material, anything. Secondly, and because I didn't really know what I was doing exactly, I had to have a hold on something and so I limited myself to 6 pictures, and I limited my holdings so I could make six pictures and in doing the six pictures I did not work very hard. You know, I went to the loft where I photographed and then I would stand there for a little while, and so I wasn't doing anything physically but when I got through taking those 6 pictures I felt very exhausted. I felt exhausted like you feel when you have been crying for a half a day, that kind of exhaustion. I said, gee there must be something going on with me. So I knew I was on the right track. And also, I was very unconscious of everything going on around me. I worked with a camera with the black cloth over me but I always had a cigarette in my mouth and I didn't even take it out even with the cloth. I remember one guy said -- hey buddy you are burning up and I realized it when he saw the smoke coming out. [Laughing.] So, these I knew were signs of great intensity, and involvement. And I find also another very curious thing, that once as I was looking down in my camera I saw something there I thought I didn't want and I kicked it. I got out from my hood and I looked around and I was guilty, I felt guilty that someone would see me do that. See? Guilty about that, you know? See? I was so involved with the subject that you mustn't - it was sacred you know? But see, that doesn't prove anything. To me it tells me that there must be something going on that when someone comes up to me and says the damn thing is full of people and then one comes to me and says that there is no time in that picture, then I know that there is some kind of psychological evidence. But it still does not prove anything, whether it's a good picture or not. That has something to do with something else you know? But you just have to have faith and keep on doing it. And then someone comes over and looks at it and buys it. Like Betty Parsons came over and bought one of my pictures and I loved Betty very much and she was willing to spend \$25 on it? You need all these things you know? But later on, all that enters into yourself and you don't need that kind of approval anymore.

MS. SHIKLER: I wonder if that affected you. If it created a certain amount of self-consciousness or self-awareness that you hadn't had?

MR. SISKIND: Yes, but you see Barbara, if I had been making these pictures and there was still that inexorable environment that I had in the Photo League, I don't think that I could have kept it up very long. Because you are not making the picture for yourself you see, you always have someone. And I may not have gone back to what I was doing before or gone over to them but I think I would have made certain compromises which would have made it a little easier for them you know? It's inevitable but you don't even know that it exists. I was lucky. So, I lost all my photographers -

MS. SHIKLER: You did?

MR. SISKIND: Oh sure. There was one photographer that wrote for a photographer's magazine saying Siskind is photographing dirt and mish-mosh and all kinds of things like that, you know?

MS. SHIKLER: And yet today they say of you, again in this same work, where they said that you have in fact carried the torch of tradition into the 20th Century. In other words, adapted the legacy of Stieglitz.

MR. SISKIND: This is a very intelligent photographer who realized that I brought certain things, like we are talking about you know, multiple meanings and things of that sort. That is what he meant. Ambiguity - I brought that into photography. Also, the whole sense of making a picture you see? That comes from my sense of a flat plane. I am making a picture. I am not making a person, I am making a picture. And, this is another world, you know? And, these kind of things, that is what he meant. And it seems perfectly simple now. I mean there are other guys that made pictures before me that were on a flat plane, but they were not committed to it, you know?

MS. SHIKLER: Well, it wasn't a primary focus for them.

MR. SISKIND: That's right, yes.

MS. SHIKLER: But I think that you at this time in history with those relationships with other painters.

MR. SISKIND: Yes.

MS. SHIKLER: Had you done a lot of reading at that point?

MR. SISKIND: No, later on I read some - there was never anything to read.

MS. SHIKLER: Well, the various critics who were beginning to speak for instance of the painters, you know, people like Greenberg and -

MR. SISKIND: Well I read there articles. Sure I read Greenberg later on. And an interesting commentary to bring up Greenberg, when I had my first show at Egan, he used to come to Egan, they knew each other very well. And one day he was there and I was there and we were leaving and we are going down the elevator and he said to me - he said, you can't do that in photography. Photography has to tell a story.

MS. SHIKLER: Photography has to be what?

MR. SISKIND: Be anecdotal. And he was telling me, and to this day he will say the same thing. As a matter of fact, that whole thing came up in Chicago when he made a speech. And someone asked him, well how about Siskind. Is that photography? And he said, no, I don't like Siskind. And we are good friends by the way. We help each other. As a matter of fact, he sent someone to me to have his picture taken because he said Siskind is the best photographer. It's just on the esthetics. He said, yes I still feel the same way about Siskind. He said, Siskind asked me to write an introduction to his book. It's the introduction that Harold Rosenberg did. And Greenberg said he turned me down. And the interesting thing is that it's true, he did turn me down. But the reason he gave me was that he can't afford to write articles without being paid, that is what he wrote me on the postcard. Now the fact that I asked him indicates to you, gives you some idea of my attitude about criticism and photography. I was publishing a book of photographs and I wanted a guy to write an interesting and knowledgeable way about it. That is not to say that I was a great photographer. And he was the only guy I knew I thought was conscious of the aesthetic problems.

MS. SHIKLER: Which you felt that you shared with all artists?

MR. SISKIND: That's right. That's right. I didn't want to ask someone who is going to say that Siskind is great and all that stuff. I don't need that.

MS. SHIKLER: But it's interesting that painters were ready to accept your concept of esthetics and didn't say to you - you are out of line, whereas other photographers did. They were not as -

MR. SISKIND: Well, the painters saw that I was doing something that was very similar to what they were doing. I was making interesting images and so forth. The painters who accepted me were not painters who were doctrinaire, you know? They also liked pictures like Cartier-Bresson's.

MS. SHIKLER: Well, somebody like Greenberg isn't necessarily doctrinaire either, except in reference to this he became -

MR. SISKIND: Yes, well he is doctrinaire altogether, we know that by now.

MS. SHIKLER: Well, he was elastic to them.

MR. SISKIND: What?

MS. SHIKLER: He was open to them is what I mean.

MR. SISKIND: Yes, but he always is very specific and narrow in his point of view. He has done that ever since we've known him, you know? One year he is promoting what's his name - one year he is promoting say Gottlieb and then two years later he is denouncing Gottlieb and promoting say Jackson Pollock. And then two years later Jackson Pollock is on the wrong side, it's not the right art. You've got to have a hard edge to it or something - whatever. So he has always been doctrinaire. That's the way he is. And then when Harold came along and you know, Harold was - well, the thing about Harold was he was interesting you know? [Laughs.] When you read him you're reading literature and it's interesting. But with Greenberg, I don't know, I don't feel I am reading literature -

MS. SHIKLER: I found something to kind of sort of set up a question for me, when I was reading some of these comments, that Rosenberg had been called the Apollinair of his time, of this age. And I thought then of the Surrealists of course, and the difference between your approach which does to some extent acknowledge the unconscious and what's happened with the New York artists who often - well, they don't necessarily lay claim to that as much as the surrealists did, and I wonder what your feelings of allegiance were towards the surrealists' philosophy?

MR. SISKIND: Well, I think a lot of what the surrealists did and what they were saying --I never liked the story telling part of their work. For some reason I never liked the story telling pictures. I didn't care much about a lot of some I felt was kind of peens and things of that sort. I always had a very conscious drive towards formalist

art. And so I would say that a guy like Mondrian can thrill me more than a complicated surrealist. But you inevitably use some surrealists' situations. Configurations and things like that all the time. Maybe it's a kind of weakness you know?

MS. SHIKLER: It's either that or a strength.

MR. SISKIND: You take advantage of - you have irrelevant things, you know? Acting with each other and against each other - its - it is surreal you know? Also, photography itself is completely a surreal situation. You take something and you use a person and it looks like the person or it isn't a person. You know, all kinds of levels on which a picture exists and basically it's a surreal object. And it's just as surreal as when you burn someone in effigy. It's a ridiculous thing you know, it's crazy that people behave that way.

MS. SHIKLER: Well, you don't liken the same impulse which is almost a belief in voodoo, to the photographic impulse do you?

MR. SISKIND: No I don't.

MS. SHIKLER: You don't believe in voodoo.

MR. SISKIND: No.

MS. SHIKLER: It isn't a magical process but you do feel as you say that you have drawn from your unconscious without doing it deliberately and yet you reach for an esthetic thing.

MR. SISKIND: Yes.

MS. SHIKLER: What happens if you say, set out let's say on a project and you come to that project with a certain preconception of what you think you are going for and what you hope perhaps find. Are you surprised by the next set of developments?

MR. SISKIND: What's a project? What do you mean by a project?

MS. SHIKLER: Well, by a project, let's say you have in mind to work in a particular location or with certain materials or that sort of thing. You come to it with a certain set of expectations.

MR. SISKIND: Right.

MS. SHIKLER: What happens?

MR. SISKIND: What happens is the answer - the answer to that is that you don't know what's going to happen. If what happens is the same as what happened before. Because every situation that you go to has its antecedent, you know? Of some sort. It may be the very same place that you go back to or may be very similar or appears similar and if you are - if you don't see anything that amazes you or is different or has other possibilities, you know? You might be able to do something with it in the darkroom. You may just get back in the car and go on somewhere else. I think the way I put it is the same way that Bill put it when someone asked what is the subject of your picture? And Bill said, the previous picture, see? And, pictures are very deep truth and that is exactly the way I work.

MS. SHIKLER: Bill de Kooning you are referring to?

MR. SISKIND: Yes, de Kooning, what am I saying? Bill?

MS. SHIKLER: Yes.

MR. SISKIND: You want the machine to understand who Bill is huh?

MS. SHIKLER: Exactly.

MR. SISKIND: And you go back - I do anyway, very often to the very same place and start from there. To go back to the same place is a kind of - it makes you feel comfortable at least in that part, but then if you keep it that way. If you keep it comfortable then you fade out. You've got to take some sort of a journey from there.

MS. SHIKLER: Are you - would you like to speak on - I am going to ask you about your methodology and your techniques which have been described as usual. In quotation marks. But, before I do, are you interested at all in speaking of your plans on the next phase of your creative life? Do you have anything that you would like to talk about there?

MR. SISKIND: Well, when you get to be where I am now, then you get involved in a lot of what I call activity. That relates to the actual process of working. For instance I have a book coming out. I have a big retrospective show coming out. I have to get ready to do some more of this talking, you know? I know some will be pleasant, some is going to be very unpleasant, like public television and things like that where you don't know what the audience is going to talk to you about. With you it's almost like I am talking to myself. I am assuming a certain placement. But I am worried about the other kind. But, I still have plans to work. I have, as I told you before, a number of strands that I am interested in, and that is of course there under what I would call a curtain of my one dream. One dream of a kind of picture I hope that I can find a situation where I can make that dream. So, what I will do is probably back to start the remaking of certain pictures, where I made a few pictures and I know now or feel now that that situation can get me more. You know, I may go to Peru. I will see what my circumstance is. I have a few ideas on things I might have missed. I have been involved in certain shapes, forms and I am working away from that whole Franz Kline opus - gestural things to something other than that. And I have this New York thing when I have to inevitably come periodically for business and for friends and family and that kind of thing. There are certain areas here that I want to explore. I think I told you about the remnants of the torn poster. I am working on that kind of thing, different circumstances. And I have seen certain things and I want to see if I can really find them to photograph them in relation to that and the environment and things like that which I haven't done. And the other day I was looking at a friend's work and I had found that she had worked on something that I had imperfectly worked on years ago in Chicago, and I will see if I can find something like that again. I have a feeling that I am kind of running down. I give up more easily than I used to. And physically I don't have as much energy or strength. And I always have to accommodate myself to the person who is helping me to some extent. These people are marvelous. They are at my service, but they are there. I have to talk to them sometimes and create something else. So that's it.

MS. SHIKLER: How often do you work? Is there any kind of consistent answer that is possible to that kind of question? If you could compare?

MR. SISKIND: Well, it's very similar to the way that I have always worked except now I am free to choose the time I want to work, in teaching and I have taught for 50 years.

MS. SHIKLER: That is a long time.

MR. SISKIND: And for 30 of those years I was doing photography. A lot of it depends on a kind of a sense of urgency depending on how I feel when I get up, but I apportion it and so forth. And then a lot of it is now made simpler for me, thank God, so I could have someone do certain parts of it for me. There is more communication between people I want to see, and we work everything around. It's a whole thing now.

MS. SHIKLER: Well let's say that you have chosen a site. Is that - if I am using the wrong terminology you can kick the tape or something.

MR. SISKIND: Yes sure.

MS. SHIKLER: Do you still have a pang of anxiety if you kick something out of the way, do you ever manipulate the site itself or do you accept it as it is?

MR. SISKIND: No, the most on this I have done is - I used to for instance, say I had a poster I wanted to photograph and a piece of it was hanging and it would blow in the wind. I used to tear off the piece that was blowing because it would be disturbing, and now it doesn't bother me at all. I am more casual about things.

MS. SHIKLER: So say in the past if you did let's say go out to something like that, approximately how much of your day would you spend? Would you be concerned about the light and the changing atmosphere?

MR. SISKIND: No, I would just see what's there and if I can't photograph it I will arrange to come back at a different time. See, if I see something and it needs light directly on it and I am on a - in a shady part of the day I will come back. But usually, I just look and if it looks like what I want I just go out and photograph it. Otherwise, it doesn't look like I - maybe I will see it another day. But usually what I do - to give you an example of a simple situation that took place say yesterday, okay? This young man was picking me up in a car, we had a couple of hours. So I got up in the morning and it was raining and then it stopped raining and the fellow was here, and I said, okay we will go out when it stops raining. Okay? So we go out anyway. I say let's go out, I have a pencil and a piece of paper with me and we will drive up and down the streets where I think there is material and I will make notes and come back some other time maybe. So when we get downstairs - it's drizzling so we get into the car and so we start and we go down and I say stop here and make a note of that street and maybe an indication of what it is, which direction it's facing and whatever. And as we are driving along we stopped a few times and it stopped drizzling and I see something and I say, well let's stop here and instead of making a note I'll photograph it. And it was something that I had seen a long time ago driving on the Bowery I started to work on that. And so I walked back and I made some notes, but instead of following the notes which I didn't even use, I just walked back and kept taking pictures and the man was driving the car around and meeting me in another place. And

while I am walking I might see someone else, and all of these pictures relate to things I have done but there is a little different element to it. But other times we just enjoy the image, the mark, the scribbles. Some-times you come to it and you can't work it out, you can't get the right angle or whatever. And you work and then - Now in Peru, when I go to a place like Peru, there I have an ideal working condition. I have someone rent a car and devote to me - it is not very difficult for him to give me three or four hours, there are no big sacrifices so I don't feel bad about it and he will meet me or if I am staying at his house we start out in the morning and I will say why don't we go over to that street and he names the street and I say - yeah, that's the street. And, he may say -- we may never get to that God damn street, you know? See, I knew that street and we would ride up and down that street and we may run into something you know?

MS. SHIKLER: This is interview number two with Aaron Siskind at his New York studio at 876 Broadway. Good morning again!

MR. SISKIND: Good morning!

MS. SHIKLER: I thought that we would get some questions about your relationship with Rothko this morning and then perhaps get back to some other questions on yourself. First, I think that we should determine when you met him. When did you meet Mark Rothko?

MR. SISKIND: Well, to tell you the truth I am not really very sure of that. I would say it was in the late '30's, and I can't remember even how I met him or who introduced me to him. I kind of have a suspicion that I met him - gee, I don't know. I really don't know. I remember going to a show of a group called "The Ten" and I think it was that very last show probably together. And the only one I knew in that show I think, during that time, was Adolph Gottlieb whom I had known for a long time and I think that I may have met him there. My earlier association with him was the photographing of his paintings.

MS. SHIKLER: That was the first time that you had any real interchange.

MR. SISKIND: Oh yes.

MS. SHIKLER: Well before that had you ever been to his studio or visited with him or had discussions?

MR. SISKIND: Oh, I think all of that came later. All that came later. He had very recently separated from his wife.

MS. SHIKLER: His first wife.

MR. SISKIND: Yes, who was a jewelry maker and also I gathered he had recently been helping her in her business, some kind of a business and that he was discontented about doing that. And this is the feeling I got from when I first met him and got to know him. But he was very sensitive about his wife and all that, from whom he was separated. Because I distinctly remember, and this was also in the early days of our association -- he had met her on the street casually -

MS. SHIKLER: When they had first separated?

MR. SISKIND: Yes. And they were talking and I injected a little malicious humor you might call it, just fun. And I remember that night he called me up and he was outraged and sore as hell about the fact that I - and he was so touchy and of course, he was a touchy guy anyhow.

MS. SHIKLER: Was he touchy on his own account or his -

MR. SISKIND: I can't remember what he said but he was sore at me for making light of some trouble they were having.

MS. SHIKLER: Had you been aware that after they split up that he was quite devastated? Did you meet him during that period where he was more or less or seemed to be very affected by her leaving?

MR. SISKIND: Well, there was something going on there and specifically I could remember - this was of course a few years after I had met him, having lunch with him up there around 52nd Street, somewhere around there, and he specifically told me in the course of our conversation that he felt that marriage was not for an artist and he was through with it. And that of course was very funny because soon after that I brought Mel up to his apartment and she stayed over I remember. He wasn't really very fussy because he tried Annie first.

MS. SHIKLER: He what?

MR. SISKIND: There happened to be three or four women. By some curious coincidence, there was my girlfriend and there was Mel who was living with my girlfriend at the time and they were very young, I think 19, and we happened to all go up to this little party and the party wasn't very much because all night he and Harold

Rosentberg were standing in the middle of the room and Harold could divide a room you know, because he was tall, and Mark had a lot of bulk to him too, and there they were standing there and arguing all evening and there I was with all the women you know, sitting there. And we couldn't get any party going. And anyway, Mel stayed over and I think a few days later he called Mel for a date and she said she had a date. He was so angry and so upset about it. He said oh no, you are not going on any date. He got so jealous I suppose and of course she made a changeover to him and it wasn't long after that that they finally got married. And then I remember saying to him -- I thought - when he was thinking of getting married, or when he was getting married I reminded him of his remark that marriage was not for us and he denied it completely saying that he never said anything like that.

[Laughter.]

MS. SHIKLER: When you met him shortly after the split with Edith do you remember where he was living?

MR. SISKIND: Yes, at that time I think he was living up around 52nd Street or something.

MS. SHIKLER: That was the place over the speakeasy I think.

MR. SISKIND: Something of that sort. I think that he had the front room.

MS. SHIKLER: Do you remember what the room looked like at all? What kind of paintings?

MR. SISKIND: Well, I guess he had some paintings there. I don't know any specifically.

MS. SHIKLER: Well that had to be - when he was living there it was in the early '40's is that correct?

MR. SISKIND: Right.

MS. SHIKLER: Well I was going to ask you about that period. During - I was going to ask you if you remembered what the pictures were like at that time and whether you were conscious of any transitions?

MR. SISKIND: Well, the earliest pictures, at that period he was painting those biomorphic shapes and I can remember very specifically in 1944 or 1945 I invited them to come up and stay with me in Gloucester, I had a place there, and I could remember him doing water colors then in the biometric shapes.

MS. SHIKLER: At the earliest meeting then between you and him do you remember the kind of work he was doing then?

MR. SISKIND: Not the earliest, I can't remember. But he was doing those biomorphic things and then soon after he - soon after he and Adolph issued that manifesto and there was a third person - oh no, there was no third person, but there were three guys at the meeting in which they decided that the subject matter was important and that they would get a universal subject matter and they went back to the Greek myths and the third fellow thought that it was a complete hoax, sitting down and deciding what you are going to do. You know, that kind of thing. And he withdrew. I wish I could remember his name. I knew the name the other day when I was thinking about it.

MS. SHIKLER: Lou Harris you said.

MR. SISKIND: Yes, Lou Harris was his name. And one thing that Mark painted then were paintings that referred to Greek myths, using the Greek myths, not immediately, but using elements in painting like eyes and things of that sort to represent guilt. Yes, that's the stuff.

MS. SHIKLER: I am going to show Mr. Siskind the *Untitled #24* in the Guggenheim book, 1939 to 1940.

MR. SISKIND: Right, that's right. And as a matter of fact in trade I got one of those, he gave me one.

MS. SHIKLER: And what did you give him?

MR. SISKIND: Well, I photographed his paintings and he had to give me something you know? So we made a trade and he offered me -

MS. SHIKLER: So you had already photographed his paintings before the Betty Parsons show?

MR. SISKIND: Sure.

MS. SHIKLER: When did you first photograph his work?

MR. SISKIND: Well I think it was soon after that Ten show.

MS. SHIKLER: I see. What did you photograph and where?

MR. SISKIND: Where did I photograph it? I went to his place I guess up on 52nd Street and photographed them. I think I did them there and not at my place. And I did a lot of photographing. I can't remember all the pictures I took but I remember he finally decided he would give me something. And he was not a very generous man compared to say other painters. They weren't selling anything, you know. Nothing had any monetary value and he couldn't afford - you know, it would have been a hardship for him to get a photographer and pay him the \$3.00 or \$5.00 a picture.

MS. SHIKLER: For what reason had he commissioned you to photograph his work?

MR. SISKIND: I guess he wanted photographs to show someone and I don't know where he showed these. I don't remember any show of this stuff.

MS. SHIKLER: Numbers 24 and 25 in the catalog?

MR. SISKIND: But he asked me to photograph them. They all needed photographs to show.

MS. SHIKLER: Do you have any - do you still have any of the negatives for those? Do you know whether they are part of your Archives?

MR. SISKIND: I don't know. I would have to look. I'd have to look. I haven't - it's possible that I have some. I kept quite a few of them. I've lent them to the Guggenheim for a couple of shows, and you lend them negatives and you never get them back. You know, I have some stuff on Barney Newman and I guess maybe Franz Kline.

MS. SHIKLER: And you never got them back?

MR. SISKIND: No, I never did. Now recently I didn't send negatives, I just sent them the prints.

MS. SHIKLER: I suppose that's a wise choice if you want your work back.

MR. SISKIND: Yes. Well, if they would want to preserve them I would give them to them.

MS. SHIKLER: Would it be likely, is all of your past work now with the -

MR. SISKIND: The Center?

MS. SHIKLER: At the Center?

MR. SISKIND: No, my negatives are all in my possession except the negatives which I retired now that I am not going to print anymore. Just very few. I have them all. I don't consider these copies of the paintings as particularly my work. It's just a job I did and I do it for a lot of the fellows. Ben Zion, I used to do endless photographs for him. He wanted everything photographed and he gave me a painting. And I remember - it's very strange, the artists how they would - the artists were always kind of tight usually often were the most ungenerous like Adolph Gottlieb, who was very tough about being paid for his paintings and this and that, and put a high price on everything, you know, a high value on his work. Now when I photographed his paintings, he put a high value on my work you see? Otherwise he was tough. He made a painting of me and I wanted it and he measured it and said, this is how much it is. You know? This is very interesting. Now, a guy like Rothko who you are having a casual relationship with, we weren't talking money and values or things like that - when it came to get a painting, he showed me a few little ones and I picked one and he said, oh no Aaron that's you know - pick another one.

MS. SHIKLER: Do you remember what the picture was that he wouldn't let you have?

MR. SISKIND: Well, if I wanted it -

MS. SHIKLER: I said, do you remember which one it was, what it looked like?

MR. SISKIND: Oh, I will tell you what it was like. It was a series of heads as though it were fragments of the wall.

MS. SHIKLER: In this cast of the *Antignone*?

MR. SISKIND: Yes, one like that.

MS. SHIKLER: Something like *Omen of the Eagle*. That is a 1942 painting. Was it around that time that you are talking about?

MR. SISKIND: Yes, that was it, yes.

MS. SHIKLER: Number 26 in the catalog.

MR. SISKIND: But I don't have mine anymore. When we were publishing my first book it was something that the artists themselves were financing for me, they gave me paintings. We needed some money so I was going to sell that one to a gallery in order to get the money and they offered me \$300 for it. This was back in 1958. I was in Chicago and I called up Mark. I said Mark I have got to sell your painting because I need the money. I said that they offered me \$300. By that time Mark was making lots of money. So when I compare the period we are talking about with the period that I called him up in 1958 it's kind of sardonic. He said I'll ask my lawyer whether I should buy it from you. So he called me back that day and said, you can sell it. That is very interesting. I don't know what the meaning of that is but there is something about it that sends a little thrill in there or something. Well, anyway, the worst example I ever had of an artist acting like a very hard headed businessman was an artist who also was a Communist which was strange - Joe Solomon, a very nice person. He gave me - he said I would like you to photograph my work through all the periods, you know? So I said okay. So I photographed I think 25 paintings. And they were difficult to do because some were very old. So I did them and it took me a lot of time and he finally said that he was very happy with them, I gave him a lot of prints. And so Joe said to me, Aaron if I had these done I would have paid \$3 for each photograph so that equals \$75. He said I have these little gouaches, they were done on black - you know the kind of paper that you have in albums and he had done a lot of very quick sketches. And he said these sell for \$25 in the gallery. You remember we were talking about Depression. So he said, you can have three. So it was like he made me purchase three. He said, here is a big stack of them and he gave me a big stack like this and he said, pick out three. So I looked through this whole big stack, there were maybe 100 in there, and I picked out 3 and I said, I'll take these three, Joe. And he looks at me and he said, oh these two Aaron you can't have, they are my favorites out of the 100. He said, I will let you have - don't take these two but you can have three for those two, so I got four. It is amazing. You pick out from 100 pictures three pictures, and two of them are his favorites. So that is the way that he was. You see, the thing is that later on when they could sell them these things had real money value. And then of course, you understand why you deal differently you know. And like for instance, even in the early '50's I used to come into New York from Chicago, I was teaching at the Institute of Design. We had a scholarship auction there every year and of course as soon as I came out there and they knew that I knew all the fellows there, they had me come to New York and beg for things. I would go around and ask the guys to give me stuff. Like de Kooning would give me things he was working on and we would sell them and wouldn't get that much -- maybe \$100 for a painting you know? And Muriel Newman collection had a few of them she bought for about \$85. Well, I couldn't do that now. I couldn't go to de Kooning now. That would be ridiculous. I couldn't ask the guy to give me something that is really exchangeable for say \$10,000 you know? Then you could do it.

MS. SHIKLER: That is too bad. It changes something doesn't it? Considerably.

MR. SISKIND: Well, I suppose it does.

MS. SHIKLER: I wanted to go back for a moment if we could, but I hate to stop your flow.

MR. SISKIND: Go ahead.

MS. SHIKLER: But I wanted to clarify something. The first time that you photographed Rothko's shows, and he was doing that mytho-poetic painting. Do you remember where you photographed?

MR. SISKIND: I think I photographed them up in his place.

MS. SHIKLER: But do you remember where that was?

MR. SISKIND: I think it was around 52nd Street, somewhere around there. Between 5th and 6th Avenue?

MS. SHIKLER: Well, it depends. Now if you tell me that you were doing the work when it looked like this, this was around 1939 or 1940.

MR. SISKIND: I would make a note - I will make a note to see what Rothko negatives I have. I am pretty sure that I worked with a 4-5 camera then. I will look through my 4-5 negatives. See the only -

MS. SHIKLER: Well, let me interrupt you for a second. Was it also painting like this? Numbers 30 and 31?

MR. SISKIND: Yes, you mean the more bio-morphic thing?

MS. SHIKLER: Yes. So it is possible that some of those earlier ones, the mytho-poetic were left over from an earlier period?

MR. SISKIND: It could have been. I wouldn't swear to it. I will have to think on that. What I will tell you on that is I am really not sure.

MS. SHIKLER: Well the only reason that I am trying to pin you so specifically is to get a record of where he might have been living, where he was painting and date some of these things a little better.

MR. SISKIND: Right, yes.

MS. SHIKLER: Okay, let's go on to your relationship with him and how it became more complex, when it became more involved. Did you socialize a lot together? After a certain point?

MR. SISKIND: Now and then. Now and then. I was a fairly good friend of his. Let me just try to remember different occasions. I remember one occasion when I drove with Newman and his wife. Barney Newman had a car - I don't know why he happened to have a car, but he had a car which had a rumble seat in the back. And, I remember my girlfriend, Ethel, who was the girl who lived with Mel just for a short time, but we both were in the rumble seat and we were frozen to death. And when we got out there, I think we were expecting a hurricane and I remember we all went to I guess it was Bob Motherwell's, and at that time he was married to a girl who was Mexican, some kind of a Spanish thing, a good looking dame, and I remember we had - I don't know who got us to do this but all the guys sat down in a circle. I remember there was Bob Motherwell, Barney Newman and Rothko and me and there may not have been anybody else. And we just talked, you know, about painting and their lives and all the girls were just waiting and you know, they wanted to dance and they wanted to have some fun. They were great girls. My girlfriend was about 20 years old you know? How old was I then? I don't know, around 40? They were marvelous times.

MS. SHIKLER: So the guys were all sitting in a circle talking about their lives?

MR. SISKIND: Well, I think that they set a real subject. I think that it was Bob Motherwell said, well why don't each one of us say what we think we are really about. Why we are painting, why we are doing what we are doing. And I don't remember what everybody said, but I remember Mark said - let me see how I can put it so it will be close to what he said. What he felt was that he had lost all faith in social agencies to help people. In other words -- you have to do it yourself. And that was his theme. He said he thought that that was his theme, that was what his painting was all about.

MS. SHIKLER: Do you remember what year that was?

MR. SISKIND: Well I only know with my association with Ethel and that was either the last year of the war or right after the war. I think that it was during the war but it might have been about 1944 or something like that.

MS. SHIKLER: So you said that he had lost all faith in social agencies?

MR. SISKIND: Yes. I think he was interpreting. He felt that that was the drive behind his painting. I suppose that he had to do it on his own and it also was a reaction to various experiences with the Artists Union and things like that. They had all terrible experiences there. Gottlieb was the same way. They got fed up with the political people. They felt that the others had a motive that had nothing to do with the integrity of painting. Something of that sort. I remember what I said, which was very curious. I felt that the drive behind me was a need for order. That my whole being was disturbed and disorganized. I felt the same thing. I also did not have much faith in politicians and social agencies and that came as a reaction to my past experiences and I felt the way I could get the feeling of a sense of order was to make a picture and that is why I thought that the picture had to be an absolute and unique thing. That's the way I felt. I can't remember what Bob said or what Barney said. We talked. And that was about 1940. We could find out if there was a hurricane then. [Laughing]

MS. SHIKLER: But you thought that it was more or less towards the end of the war.

MR. SISKIND: It was in the last years of war because I know that because I know when I met Ethel. I met Ethel I think around 1943.

MS. SHIKLER: Okay. You photographed your show at Betty Parsons didn't you?

MR. SISKIND: That's right. I have some installation shots of him I think standing there and I think they were done with a 5-7 camera. If I still have them. Perhaps I lent the negatives instead of making prints on them.

MS. SHIKLER: Well, in discussing the various transition periods that we have been trying to kind of block in here, were you - he went to San Francisco as you know with Still. I was going to ask you to talk a little bit about him and Still and what went on, and also - but before you get into that I wondered whether you were conscious of any change in his style, whether it crystallized for instance to the things that we were more familiar with later - before or after San Francisco?

MR. SISKIND: Well, I don't know. I think that you just have to work from evidences of the paintings. You are trying to get me to remember and I am not sure. I think that the style became that pure you know? Rectangle on

rectangle, right along and all that kind of thing. And after? Gee, I don't know. He had a show at the Art of this Century. That was Peggy Guggenheim's museum. I remember being there at that one and that was about - I think that was before he went out - that was maybe 1946? I don't know.

MS. SHIKLER: Well, when you said that you began to be conscious of the changes after?

MR. SISKIND: I don't know.

MS. SHIKLER: Okay, I won't - you mean that this began to show up after? Now, this is numbers 69 and 70 in the Guggenheim catalog.

MR. SISKIND: When did that come?

MS. SHIKLER: Well, number 67 is 1945 here. And, *Untitled 68* is '45, and these two are 1946. Now, *Composition #69* is 1946.

MR. SISKIND: I think that something like that may have been in the Peggy Guggenheim show, I am not sure.

MS. SHIKLER: And this multiform, #70, is 1948.

MR. SISKIND: Yes, that's later.

MS. SHIKLER: A little bit later.

MR. SISKIND: Well, that is after he came back from - he was out there - just for the summer, and he -

MS. SHIKLER: Was that 1950 or '51? No, it was earlier.

MR. SISKIND: Where? San Francisco?

MS. SHIKLER: Yes?

MR. SISKIND: 1947. And they invited me to come out and I was out there for a couple of weeks. I had had a show at Charlie Egan just before we went out there I guess. I took some of the pictures with me, and you know the name of Douglas MacAgy?

MS. SHIKLER: Yes.

MR. SISKIND: Well, his wife at that time was running something like the Legion of Honor.

MS. SHIKLER: Yes, the Palace of the Legion of Honor.

MR. SISKIND: And she wanted a show, and also-I remember one of the teachers, I don't know who he was, had seen the pictures and borrowed them to show his class, because that is what he was talking about, see?

MS. SHIKLER: Your pictures?

MR. SISKIND: Yes, my little prints. But the interesting thing there was that when I wanted to - Mark was giving a number of lectures about the New York scene and one day I said I would like to come in and listen and he wouldn't let me come in. He absolutely refused and said don't you dare.

MS. SHIKLER: Why is that?

MR. SISKIND: I don't know. I never knew.

MS. SHIKLER: Did you ever find out what was the subject of the lecture?

MR. SISKIND: Yes, he was talking about New York and what the New York painters were doing.

MS. SHIKLER: But nobody ever told you the specifics of the lectures?

MR. SISKIND: No, I never asked. I just thought that if I had nothing else to do I would go in. So, on that level I was not terribly close to him. He didn't think that I knew much about painting.

MS. SHIKLER: He didn't think that you knew much about painting?

MR. SISKIND: I don't think so, and I don't think he ever went to any of my shows. He may have gone to one but I don't know about it.

MS. SHIKLER: How do you feel about that?

MR. SISKIND: That's all right. [Laughter.] I was used to those things. Rejection. I have been rejected all my life and loved at the same time so I know both.

MS. SHIKLER: A good dynamic I guess. Keeps each of them meaningful I suspect.

MR. SISKIND: Yes.

MS. SHIKLER: What about that period and his relationship with Still? Do you want to talk about that a little bit?

MR. SISKIND: I don't know. Still was out there and I think that he was teaching out there then, and we knew him but I was not conscious of Still. The first time I was conscious of Still was after, when we came back. I must have been more intimate with Mark than I think or than I remember actually, because I remember going up to a room, and it was a small room to see Clyfford Still and he had all these paintings and they were all big paintings. And I looked at them and thought, now why the hell should Mark ask me to come up with him? It may have been a coincidence, it may have just been that I was around. So I must have known and seen him more often than I can remember, and I think - he had a kind of very warm feeling toward me as a person. I don't think that he really was very interested; his initial relationship was that I copied his paintings and I don't think that he - and I also was doing a lot of documentary work then. And I think the person through whom I met him, a guy called Max Yabno who was a photographer and Mark detested him. And I know that one week that I was visiting in San Francisco Yabno happened to be there at that time, he was living out there and he was doing a book on San Francisco and he came up one day and picked me up to go somewhere. I remember that evening Mark said to me, I don't want to see that guy in my house again. He was really - something happened between them. I don't know what and I never asked. Now why did I mention that - it may have been that Mark associated me with photographers and that sort of thing and didn't think that I could be thought of as a serious artist and all that. Maybe he was right, I don't know. [Laughter]

MS. SHIKLER: Well did his attitude change when your work changed?

MR. SISKIND: I think later on, yes. I think maybe that I was doing documentary work at that time and he was not interested in that. And the only time he ever even mentioned my work and said he was interested in it or anything was in the very last years, once on my visit to New York, maybe it was at the time of Franz Klein's funeral at St. Bartholomew's and he said to me, you know I saw your little book and that was the book that had been published a long time before.

MS. SHIKLER: Which one was that?

MR. SISKIND: The one that George Eastman House published, the little one that was kind of a catalog thing and he said he had seen some nice pictures in there. That was the only time that I had any reaction from him to my work.

MS. SHIKLER: That's interesting.

MR. SISKIND: You know, a lot of artists came to shows but I had never seen him there. Still I was very friendly with him. We used to be up there quite often and of course he married Mel and I had Ethel and we were together the four of us, and there was a warmer mood in him and Ethel was a very sensual and open kind of a girl - and so was Mel. She was lively - she was young. And she was very good for Mark. They were very poor you know. Mel worked and I think she was earning \$50 a week and he was teaching at some Hebrew school out in Brooklyn. But they got along. It's good to be poor when you are young - when you're dumb. [Laughing.] It's very stimulating.

MS. SHIKLER: Stimulating because there is the prospect of not being poor.

MR. SISKIND: I will tell you, you enjoy your joy so much. There is a quality to it. When we went out to eat we went where it didn't cost much, you know. We enjoyed it. It was great. We did what we damned please. But you have to be young.

MS. SHIKLER: The treats are really treats when you are young.

MR. SISKIND: Oh yes.

MS. SHIKLER: So you saw quite a difference in him when he married?

MR. SISKIND: Oh yes. He was very happy with her - those first years.

MS. SHIKLER: What year was that? Let me check back to the date of his marriage.

MR. SISKIND: When did they get married?

MS. SHIKLER: Let's see: Married Marilyn March 31st, 1945.

MR. SISKIND: Yes. Yes. And then they came up to stay with me in Gloucester - they came up for a week or so and they were very happy. I think that he was beginning to get hold of his painting too. I don't think that Mark was a naturally skillful painter like a lot of painters we know who can paint. They can paint anything. All they need is an idea. Mark had the ideas see? He was a very thoughtful guy. And he had a lot of opinions on what pictures are, about the history of art and he had opinions about everything. He really had very strong opinions. But that natural skill wasn't there.

MS. SHIKLER: Did he discuss that with you ever?

MR. SISKIND: No.

MS. SHIKLER: He never acknowledged that did he?

MR. SISKIND: No. I was a peculiar figure in the New York art world because, you know, I was very intimate with some of the painters but at the same time I was an outsider.

MS. SHIKLER: You were not a painter.

MR. SISKIND: And also I was very conscious of the fact that I myself knew very little because my whole background had not been in the visual arts but in the written word, or music.

MS. SHIKLER: Well, that surer that he came to visit you in Gloucester, did he work while he was visiting?

MR. SISKIND: Yes. He was doing those biomorphics and he was doing water colors. MR. SHIKLER: He was.

MR. SISKIND: Not regularly because he was visiting. Just when we weren't doing anything and suddenly there he was. Maybe waiting for us to sit down to breakfast or after breakfast when I was doing something - he was sitting there painting. And Adolph Gottlieb was there. We visited with them. They would talk about different things. Well, the only thing - we just had a personal relationship - remarks would be about my person and my relations with other people.

MS. SHIKLER: Would he comment on your behavior?

MR. SISKIND: Yes, he said oh, you always need a girl with you Aaron, what's the matter with you? You know, things like that.

MS. SHIKLER: He would tease you?

MR. SISKIND: Yes. He was right. That was the kind of person I was. And then maybe he envied me a little because he was a little bit like that. He was very happy you know but I think that he was - I mean his first marriage had ended because he and his wife had known each other I suppose for quite a while, at least that's the feeling that I had, and there was no joy any more in it. You know? And also he had drifted away from that kind of art. The kind that she was involved in or the other people around her were. I think what he felt about art became very important in his whole life and I think that he had the kind of sense that he wanted to get away from American scene painting and that sort of thing.

MS. SHIKLER: He made that quite clear didn't he? I was going to ask you whether you saw, whether you were conscious of seeing changes in him, say after California. At what point did you spot changes, did you see changes in an outlook? Or, his relationships with people?

MR. SISKIND: Well, I don't know - I think that as he became sure of himself as a painter and as he began to get some recognition and maybe sales, I think then maybe a certain element in his personality began to come out and that is I always felt that he had kind of a distrust of people which was a kind of complement to his insecurity. I always felt that - for instance, he was very concerned about where his picture hung and how it hung, what light was on it, every-thing like that. He hated being in - maybe he never was, I don't know - in group shows. This was after he -

[Off record]

MS. SHIKLER: This is side II of interview number two with Aaron Siskind, October 2, 1982. You were saying that Mark's personality changed considerably.

MR. SISKIND: It seemed that way to me, yes. I think that he was a very - how do I say it - a very emotional

person. He had very strong emotions which could he aroused with not too much difficulty and he was always very uptight about his painting, very defensive about it. You know? And I don't know why it was. I know for instance sometimes you refer to your-self sometimes correctly and sometimes incorrectly where you try to understand someone else. And I had a kind of feeling that when you are doing something that is way-out, very different, you know? When you take a position that's quite daring you know - things like denouncing renaissance art, you know? Who is anybody can do that, you know? Also at the same time, when you take that position and you assert yourself strongly, you also have enormous doubts about yourself. I know when I do something, something that is completely new, I am kind of uncertain and unsure. You do it with certainty and then you think about it and you wonder if you have gone too far. I think that he always had a little uncertainty. That was why he was so fussy about how something should be lit and where it should hang and so on.

MS. SHIKLER: But was that characteristic of his came from the early years as well?

MR. SISKIND: No, in the early years he would show in groups and things like that. It was only as he was developing his own way of painting and the further he got into it, the further he got into realms that he didn't understand himself. You get the - the thing that constricts us, any painter, is to know. When you know you can't move. The only time you can move is when you are doing something that you really don't know and you're finding out. That's the way he was. When you do it and you are by yourself and you do it and get it done and then you look at it and you wonder about it. You have uncertainties about it. You disturb your best friend and things like that. I remember when he had his show at the Modern, I happened to come to New York and I was in the cafeteria and there was Mark coming in. We greeted each other and so forth and so on and immediately he said, let's go out and take a walk. Now what he had been doing during that show was coming there all the time watching people and watching them standing around and then he would go out and come back and that show had been on for quite a while you know? And when he lit it. The thing was dark you know. And later on - and I know that on another visit when the show would be planned I was up at his house and visiting him at the same time was Peter Selz who was putting on the show, he was a curator and he was putting on a show. Well, I had worked with Peter Selz at the Institute of Design and he was the most unliked and unrespected person at the school you know? And the reason was he doesn't know what he likes, that kind of art historian and I didn't respect him very much either. He had done a dissertation on German expressionism I understand his wife had written most of. Anyway here he was, so I said, why are you letting this guy do your show? And Mark said, I am doing a show with him because he is letting me do whatever I want in that show. Selection, the lighting, everything. He was very nervous about it. And then he wrote a mushy business about Mark. You know, that period when it was kind of the thing to write a lot of mystical things about Mark. Which was a lot of nonsense.

MS. SHIKLER: Did he ever refute some of that mystical stuff, or what did he say about it?

MR. SISKIND: Well I never talked about it. See, in the later years I didn't see him very often. Because I wasn't living here.

MS. SHIKLER: During the period just following the San Francisco period, after he came back from San Francisco, and the period just, I suppose just before he began to be taken up by the galleries, and Still became ill. It was said that he was having a breakdown. Were you ever involved with that rift between them and what had happened?

MR. SISKIND: No. The last time I saw them together was at St. Bartholomew's, the day of the St. Bartholomew's memorial service or funeral or whatever it was for Kline. I met Mark, he was standing on the steps and I was talking and Mark came along and he asked me to come up to the house. So, I went up to the house and we had coffee and we talked with Mel and that was the last time I had seen them together. Not that they weren't together.

MS. SHIKLER: So you are saying that the last time you saw Rothko was at Kline's memorial in 1962?

MR. SISKIND: I don't know if I ran into him after that. I must have. But that was the last time that I saw them together. That was the last time I saw Mel probably.

MS. SHIKLER: Rothko was invited to teach at Black Mountain and refused apparently. Did you know that?

MR. SISKIND: No -

MS. SHIKLER: When were you at Black Mountain - in 1950?

MR. SISKIND: Just in the summer of 1951.

MS. SHIKLER: And at that point, somewhere after that in 1952, when he was invited to teach he refused, and also he and Still supposedly refused to let their work travel in a Modern Museum of Art show.

MR. SISKIND: Yes, well he may not have liked what the other pictures were. He was very, very concerned about that all the time. All the time.

MS. SHIKLER: But you weren't around when he and Still were having that split. Are you aware of when he started painting very big things?

MR. SISKIND: Let's see how big were they - well, I think that he painted big things in his first Betty Parsons show. He had some very big ones. I photographed the installations there and they were enormous.

MS. SHIKLER: Did you ever discuss the size of his pictures, the reasons for what he was doing?

MR. SISKIND: Not with me, no.

MS. SHIKLER: Well, perhaps there is something else that you might want to speak about that I am not asking you?

MR. SISKIND: No. [Laughs.]

MS. SHIKLER: In terms of Mark.

MR. SISKIND: See, unfortunately I wasn't here during the 1950's. I was just here in that formative period and I saw a lot of him then. But later on I just would see him when I would come into New York from Chicago maybe two or three times a year and sometimes I would not even see him. I would see him while doing other things. I would see an awful lot of artists just because I came around to beg for a picture. But I would never get anything from Mark. He was very conscious of it. He had given some pictures to various auctions in New York and after a while he said, hell, I am not going to give any pictures anymore. The few people who want a picture can buy them at auction. I can't sell anything. He was very conscious of those things. They all became very conscious of selling, and money and things of that sort. That's what disintegrated the whole group. In the end to sue each other and denounce each other because they felt - like poor Reinhardt said something about Barney Newman and Barney felt it hurt him and this would reflect on the possibility of selling something he would sue him. Barney was suing Ad. And when Ad died there was a suit. And they stopped talking. Then after a while Mark wouldn't talk to Motherwell and Motherwell would not talk to Ad and Ad wouldn't talk - you know, it was terrible.

MS. SHIKLER: Such a change from the early days when there was such harmony. Those early Studio 35 days. You were involved with those though weren't you?

MR. SISKIND: What Studio 35?

MS. SHIKLER: When they first got together downtown.

MR. SISKIND: You mean on 9th Street? Subjects of Artists?

MS. SHIKLER: Yes. You were involved with that whole thing?

MR. SISKIND: I wasn't involved but I was involved with the Club and I would go to the other thing when they had lectures, but that is all I was involved with it. It was natural for me because I lived on 9th Street and had my dinner at the Cedar Bar. I was right there and with some I became very good and natural friends, see? A person like Franz - we respected each other and loved each other. We would party together and we would practically go to bed with the same woman you know? I mean we were very natural and similar kind of people. So it was very right for me to do that, to be friends with Franz.

MS. SHIKLER: You felt quite connected with his work as well as with him as a person?

MR. SISKIND: Right, and it was a natural. Because certain elements of his kind of work were ones that I already had developed see? And when he carried it further in his own work it affected me as well. We were the same kind of people. We were little people. We were very loving people but we were also a little macho inside. And we both were developing. Developing was very important and we were very similar. He could - but there were some very major differences. He always lived in the shadow of death. We didn't know that you see.

MS. SHIKLER: Did he know that?

MR. SISKIND: Oh he knew it because he had a bad heart and he was living to kill himself. He was not supposed to drink, he was supposed to take it easy. I never knew that.

MS. SHIKLER: He never told?

MR. SISKIND: He never told me that he had a rheumatic heart from rheumatic fever you know? We had certain

things in common. A number of us did. We had wives in the asylum and things like that. He had one, I had one, Mac Belli had one. It really was unbelievable. But he was different from me in that he was also - because I was telling you the differences you see, he lived in this kind of shadow of death - that's the first time I ever expressed myself that way about him, but he must have known. Completely indifferent. But he was capable of great verbalizing or fantasizing or something which could ease the pressures. And I couldn't do that so around him and I was pretty silent. We kind of knew that we understood each other. And he too I didn't see that much either because I left in 1951. Whenever I came to New York sometimes I would drive all night and then go to his place right away because I just felt comfortable with him. And I'd always see him. I would go to his house or the Cedar Bar. In the summer I'd visit him in Provincetown. And then his girlfriend Betsy, she kind of liked me also. I don't know - why was I saying all this?

MS. SHIKLER: I think that it had to do with group discussions and group getting together at the Club and on 9th Street.

MR. SISKIND: Oh yes, well I was very friendly with a number of the artists there. I guess maybe because they - like with a person like George Cavallon or Jimmie Rosati, you know, it was kind of an easy association. There never really seemed to be that kind of thing with Rothko because there always seemed to be something bothering Mark.

MS. SHIKLER: And he wasn't that much a part of these groups?

MR. SISKIND: No, he never came down to the Cedar Bar and I think maybe one or two times that he came down was because I brought him down there. One night I was at his house, this was on one of my visits, I was up this place and I know that we had dinner or something and then I had to go to a party - oh, not to a party, I had to go to visit someone, an old friend of mine whom I didn't like at all, a lady, and so I said why don't you come with me, I'll only stay a few minutes Mark. And he came. I was very surprised. And we went down and we stayed there for about a half hour, made a few nasty remarks and we left. And I said, let's go to the Cedar Bar, and he went. I had never seen him at the Cedar Bar. We went down there, Franz and Barney Newman might have been there and we just sat and he didn't seem to not enjoy himself, you know? As a matter of fact, when we had the 9th Street show he wasn't in it.

MS. SHIKLER: Was he invited?

MR. SISKIND: I am almost positive. Everybody was asked.

MS. SHIKLER: It's interesting. You said something earlier about the way in which he wanted his work to be received and you indicated that he was threatened by the idea that something might disturb his work because he was feeling his way so to speak. Yet in one of the earlier interviews I did with a man named Morris Calden - did you ever meet him? It was somebody who roomed with Rothko until 1940, and he was a student, he was about 10 years younger than Rothko.

MR. SISKIND: Here in New York?

MS. SHIKLER: In New York, on the East Side. First in Brooklyn and then on the East Side. And around the time that Edith left this relationship broke up. But he was saying that in those early years he as a student was always in the position of learning from Rothko who liked to teach him and liked to pontificate as well. But if Calden would ask Rothko why he did something - let's say that he would refer to a particular painting - why did you do this? Is it for this reason or that reason? Rothko would not answer directly but think about it for a minute and say -- does it disturb you? Good, I will leave it in. Now, that seems to be a kind of two sides to this coin that you are speaking about.

MS. SHIKLER: And yet at the same time wants to ruffle feathers. Wants to -

MR. SISKIND: Oh yes, oh yes. Yes. People are bellicose because they are afraid sometimes. Well, I don't want to bring it down to that low level, you know? But to me, as I expressed it before, uncertainty is a - is a great creative force. You know, it moves you, but at the same time that same uncertainty has to deal with people, public, all that sort of thing. And of course, you can create all kinds of fictions almost in our own minds and after a while you begin to believe that the pictures are what other people say it is, you know? You fantasize. I listen to people talk and they would talk to me about myself and it all sounded very good but I know that it's not right, you know? But I like it and I bet that it would affect me and I may even adopt some of those attitudes. Well I know in my field I have done a lot of things not because they were new, but I have done things because of the way I was working I wasn't really sure. As a matter of fact, I was searching for what they meant in terms of knowing them a little better myself, and also being able to help somebody else who wanted to know. So you think and you try to get a word or two and you try to delve into your own mind.

MS. SHIKLER: Did you hear Rothko do that sort of thing too?

MR. SISKIND: I don't know how much he did or what he did.

MS. SHIKLER: When he did those little sketches when he was with you in Gloucester, did he indicate that they might have been preparations for any other work?

MR. SISKIND: He never talked about it. I made believe that I didn't even notice it you know? It didn't seem - but, that was what he was working on and it was on his mind and he kept working on it wherever he went. You know, like any artist would. But they were serious and being done on huge sheets of mice handmade paper.

MS. SHIKLER: Huge sheets did you say? You mean when he was with you in Gloucester?

MR. SISKIND: Yes. Yes.

MS. SHIKLER: And he kept them?

MR. SISKIND: I guess so. I didn't see him tear them up there. It was just something that he was working on.

MS. SHIKLER: Well, back to you for a moment. I am sort of interested in the way your sense of esthetics has more or less been on that same, riding the same crest of the wave that that whole New York school group of painters - I am not saying anything that is not known - how do you feel today about current trends in art, in painting, photography, et cetera? And how do you perceive yourself in relationship to them?

MR. SISKIND: Well, I have to deal with that problem you know? Because many of my former students who are now people who are doing all kinds of things, and I often have to ask them you know, tell me what is this? What are you doing? Or, if I don't ask the student himself I might ask another former student. I have a great need to do that.

MS. SHIKLER: To ask for help in understanding what they are doing?

MR. SISKIND: Yes, I don't understand it. I can't quite figure it out.

MS. SHIKLER: Would you like to give a specific?

MR. SISKIND: Yes. Like some of them now work with pictures and words you see? So, Bart Poffle will have a picture, a picture of an apple and then right next to it he has another picture of the same apple and it's the same picture practically and underneath it, it says "apple", and then over here it says "apple". What is that all about you know? Something like that. Or I have a former student and she just got a big grant, what do you call those grants? The federal grants. She got a grant for \$25,000. This student is a young woman and I feel very close to her you know? And she showed at my gallery a few times and when I go off to California to see her she always makes a point of meeting me. And for a number of years she had done something that I had seen before. Like for instance in Italy I had seen little books of popular stories of some sort you know? They are sold very cheaply printed and illustrated with photographs, little scenes, you know? The mother hitting the child, or two lovers embracing. Very simply done, very crudely done and they illustrate instead of having little sketches. Now she is doing the very same thing. And she works with her family and she will have little scenes and it has to do with relations between her and her husband, and his children, and -

MS. SHIKLER: Like a psycho-drama in pictures.

MR. SISKIND: Yes, that's right. A little psycho thing. But they are all very coolly done and very stilted.

MS. SHIKLER: Deliberately so.

MR. SISKIND: Yes, deliberate, that's right. And the lighting on it is terrible, the shadows you know. And I don't know what it's all about. I can guess, well I say the term "stilted" and you say "psycho-drama" - I know all those things -

MS. SHIKLER: Shots of the unconscious activity.

MR. SISKIND: That's what she is doing and I don't really know why. I can guess of certain things. Then I think of certain awful reasons why she might and I don't know whether they are her reasons.

MS. SHIKLER: What would they be? What would the awful reasons be?

MR. SISKIND: The awful reasons for doing it?

MS. SHIKLER: Yes, that you can think of?

MR. SISKIND: Just to believe that you are really showing drama, that you are really expressing some kind of deep psychological thing. To me you can't say anything when it's all posed, you know? And she is obviously posing them and now what's the purpose of it? I don't really understand it. Things like that. But a lot of people are doing it. So I find that I have come a certain distance and everything that I have done seems awful classical and related to tradition so much you know? Me the tradition breaker ostensibly and I am not at all. I don't know what is going on sometimes.

MS. SHIKLER: Do you see yourself primarily as a tradition breaker and did you see yourself that way?

MR. SISKIND: Oh no. I just did what I had to do. Because of necessity. Inner necessity, that's all.

MS. SHIKLER: Well, is that that inner necessity is dictating to you now that you continue along the same lines or do you feel that there are changes in the way that you perceive this?

MR. SISKIND: I am always trying to change. I try to get some fun out of this thing.

MS. SHIKLER: But how do you see yourself in relationship now perhaps to what has happened in painting? Do you have - what kind of an identification do you have with artists, painters?

MR. SISKIND: I think that by now I have a kind of a way and a kind of meaning and I don't think I can really change it fundamentally but I have built in me certain tastes. I think that the whole world of art because there are so many participants -

MS. SHIKLER: Let's talk a little louder.

MR. SISKIND: Since there are so many participants in the world of art that it's bound to change, it's bound to be different and also it's bound to move very rapidly so that I don't feel that I have enough perspective to understand what's happening. I just try to enjoy a lot of it on different levels and if it interests me I try to understand it.

MS. SHIKLER: The way in which work was being painted during that period *where* you evolved your own very unique style, and yet a style that was related -

MR. SISKIND: Very related, yes.

MS. SHIKLER: Now so many painters have found themselves drawn to a different kind of effort, I mean the attraction for figurative painting seems to be the latest change that is taking place among many. Does that ever attract you again, or does it attract you at all?

MR. SISKIND: Oh, it's been there all the time. It's been there all the time. Photography, inevitably because it depends so much on being stimulated by the world, see? I mean that is where all the impulses come from and there are so many things happening out there that the form of your photography is multiple, and the only thing that you do is you have certain predilections, certain ways of organizing it, that's all. But it's bound to be an eclectic product, it's bound to be.

MS. SHIKLER: Do you like what's happening in painting?

MR. SISKIND: Well, I wish I saw more of it. That is one reason why I want to come to New York more often and be here because I feel now when I come here I uh - I haven't been to a gallery yet and I have been here 10 days. I hope today that I finally will because I have so many attachments and so many things, and also I think still the prime thing I want to do is my own work. See? So that is taking up all my time.

MS. SHIKLER: Good. That's nice.

MR. SISKIND: But I like some things. But there are so many different kinds of things being done and I get *Art in America* and read it and sometimes reread it. I like some of it. And an artist, I think the more the artist narrows down his view on what it's all about the better he can work.

MS. SHIKLER: A lot of distraction then you feel for the current artists.

MR. SISKIND: Oh yes. Agny like Rothko really narrowed himself real down. He for instance would stop at say performers, like a pianist - if you would talk about music, every once in a while he loved to listen to music, but he thought it was almost kind of disgusting for a man to give a concert and play Chopin and then Mozart and then play Bach, you know? Make up your mind buddy, get in there. One thing. See? That was his concept of art you know?

MS. SHIKLER: Yes.

MR. SISKIND: As an artist, you make up your mind. He was a very strange guy. All the furniture in his house was old stuff. Here was a guy producing the newest kind of painting and he likes the old music only, didn't like anything new at all.

MS. SHIKLER: He didn't like contemporary music?

MR. SISKIND: He liked Mozart.

MS. SHIKLER: And his furniture was antique or just old?

MR. SISKIND: Just old, old furniture, any kind of stuff that you buy at a high class second hand place.

MS. SHIKLER: Now are you talking about the house in the 90's, that house or -

MR. SISKIND: Well, even the one up there, it had no sense of design, just real pale, just furniture around. And when he had just his apartment *you* know, you walk into this room and it's not much. You can see that I have been influenced by something you know?

MS. SHIKLER: And there is a sense of order.

MR. SISKIND: That's right. That's right. And maybe it was things he liked you know? But in his painting it was like he entered another world. This is a very special world but he entered into it and when he comes out of that world he accepts the drab world that most people accept the same way. Oh, I guess a lot of painters were like that don't you think? I mean you take a phenomenal painter like Matisse, you know? He had the easy stuffed chairs, you know, everything represents comfort for a middle aged person. That kind of thing. They know just what is important to them and they just don't bother with anything else. It's good for them. If it could work.

MS. SHIKLER: It helps you retain a certain single mindedness doesn't it? No distractions.

MR. SISKIND: I don't know how much - even in his own field I don't know how great his spread of appreciation was. Not of appreciation, but of acceptance and pleasure.

MS. SHIKLER: How much he received or how much he had?

MR. SISKIND: How much he liked. You know, how wide was his tolerance. For instance, I remember being very shocked - when he began to complain about Proust. At that time Proust was just being translated, and he didn't like Proust. And for a stupid reason that he was talking about the upper class and the upper class and had no concept of the phenomenon of Proust, the style, to write these unbelievable sentences, 5 pages long, and his psychological insight. But the people - Proust was dealing with it was something that he was not interested in. I don't think that he was able to - I mean I think he probably - now this is a guess of mine - I am sure he disliked Picasso and one of the reasons I am sure is that Picasso did anything, like he had no center you know? Whereas, Matisse to him was just God. Matisse was so much one thing and he liked the way he put color on and all that sort of thing. Maybe that is one of the places he got that idea from. The transparent color.

MS. SHIKLER: He didn't talk about that?

MR. SISKIND: No. He liked [Roberto] Matta a great deal. I remember he made a remark to me -- this was a long time ago, that he thought that Matta was really one of the great painters, and if you look at his biomorphic forms you can see how much Matta influenced him because Matta was a very brilliant and skillful painter. Mark - [laughs] - had to really work at it.

MS. SHIKLER: But he was still talking about something that smacks very much of a '30's mentality in his objections to Proust?

MR. SISKIND: That was strange to me. But I was just giving you that illustration to indicate his acceptance, his field of acceptance of cultural things.

MS. SHIKLER: But was that during the later years that this whole Proust discussion took place?

MR. SISKIND: Well that was - it may have been on an early visit in the '50's or it may have been even before. I can't remember, but it was early though.

MS. SHIKLER: Nevertheless it was still a focus upon a concept that he had begun to reject by then.

MR. SISKIND: Yes, I would imagine as he got older he got narrower. You know? Like we all do. When it's bad you call it crotchety and your tastes get a little more fixed and also you do not have enough courage to assert yourself you know? I mean a young intelligent man could say something like "Shakespeare is nothing." But when

you get old you can actually say it seriously and give good reasons. You know?

MS. SHIKLER: Well, we seem to have come to a stopping point.

MR. SISKIND: All right, that is good with me. [Laughs.]

MS. SHIKLER: Is it?

MR. SISKIND: Sure. To me I sound better silent.

MS. SHIKLER: Not so. It's quite a fine gift to be able to put your thoughts into words. All right, we will stop for the moment at any rate. We are just about to the end of the tape.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

Last updated...September 24, 2007