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Oral history interview with Alfred Leslie, 2018 Sept. 14

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Alfred Leslie on September 14, 2018. The interview took place in Alfred's studio in New York City, and was conducted by Avis Berman for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art Oral History Project.

Avis Berman has reviewed the transcript. Her corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

AVIS BERMAN: This is Avis Berman interviewing Alfred Leslie for the Archives of American Art Oral History Project, on September 14, 2018, in his studio in New York City. I always start the same way with everyone: Would you please state your full name and date of birth?

ALFRED LESLIE: Alfred Leslie, but my original—my family name was Alfred Morton Lippitz, L-I-P-P-I-T-Z. I was born October 27, 1927.

AVIS BERMAN: And who were your parents?

ALFRED LESLIE: Well [hands Avis a picture]—this is my father.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, you're showing me a family portrait of your father with his—

ALFRED LESLIE: His mother and his sister Anna and his brother, whose name I don't remember. He and my father never spoke because this portrait, this strange family portrait, was made—believe it or not, according to my aunt Anna, now dead, they're all dead—as a memento of her husband disappearing. And she took a picture of our family together. They were never together again. She sent my father and my aunt Anna into the Hebrew Free Orphanage. This young man here, she kept.

That separated them for the rest of their lives. My father would never speak to him, and he hesitated ever having anything to do with her again. [00:02:00] My aunt Anna cried the entire time. She was in the orphanage for one solid week; she was inconsolable. Some family members felt badly about it and took her in and brought her up. My father didn't cry and he stayed there until he was 15 years old and then went out into the world. And he went to school around the corner at the Hebrew Free Technical Institute, where he learned to be an architect and an engineer and that stuff.

AVIS BERMAN: So, your mother—your father was born in this country?

ALFRED LESLIE: My father and my mother were both born in this country, and I don't know anything about who her husband was. My grandfather on my father's side.

AVIS BERMAN: Your paternal grandmother—so she was somebody named Lippitz? And what was her first name?

ALFRED LESLIE: I don't know her maiden name. I don't even know her first name. This is the dislocation of a family because she was a zealous—a religious fanatic, and my father was brought up in a Hebrew free German orphanage, which as far as I have been told, it was run by German Jews who were mostly assimilationists. So where she was very religious, my father was not, and came out a so-called totally integrated immigrant's child. But he was born in this country.

My mother was born in this country also. I don't know anything about her family. I visited her family once. She was the oldest of seven children, two of them being boys and the five others being young women. [00:04:00] She sort of ran the family, because she was the most educated

and the most articulate. Before she married my father—my father met her when he came out of the Army in World War II.

AVIS BERMAN: World War I.

ALFRED LESLIE: World War I. She was working as the lead stenographer in a typing pool of about 100 young women at Woolworth's, or one of those big organizations. She was a very dynamic person, very important in my life, as was my father.

AVIS BERMAN: Yes, and they both—and your mother's name was?

ALFRED LESLIE: Wolf, W-O-L-F.

AVIS BERMAN: Not with two Fs, just Wolf.

ALFRED LESLIE: I believe that, but I don't really know. As I say, I visited them once. I couldn't bear anything about walking into their apartment. I remember where they lived. They lived in an apartment right off of Third Avenue—well, maybe in the Burnside Avenue over in the Bronx, I don't remember—but the smell in the building overwhelmed me. It was a different culture that my mother came from, and my mother and father had no part of that. My father, as I said, had become assimilated to his experience in the orphanage, and my mother had become assimilated through the business world, in a different kind of a way, so neither one of them were religious or thought of themselves as religious.

AVIS BERMAN: And neither wanted anything—and your mother didn't want anything to do with her family either, evidently?

ALFRED LESLIE: Well, she didn't want to, but she was the *kapellmeister* of the family. She took care of all of her sisters; they always came to her with problems. [00:06:03] We occasionally visited, in New Jersey, one of her brothers, Harry, who was a very nice man with no ambition at all except to retire after 20 years working in the post office. He was sort of an idyllic family figure in the fact that they lived in Plainfield, New Jersey; they had their own house; they had a dog called Wolf, a German Shepherd; he owned a car; and he had no ambition. He did not care what he did. He was willing to go his own way, whereas his wife, my aunt Elizabeth, who was a big, generous Italian woman—they had three daughters and I was alternately in touch with them for a small amount when I came out of the service. But essentially, I had nothing to do with anyone in my family, except my father until he died.

My mother died when I was 25. She got sick on a Monday; she was dead on a Thursday. From some kind of internal cancer that had overrun every organ in her body and was diagnosed too late. My father had leukemia. He had it all the time I was a child. No one knew what the diagnosis meant or the cure for it. He lived until 1961, on and off very, very weak, in different hospitals. And he was living with me for a while at 940 Broadway, but it was too much for him and I was carrying him up and down the stairs from that loft and taking him to the dairy restaurants over here, and he asked to go to the Veterans Hospital, where he lived until he died. [00:08:11]

AVIS BERMAN: I think it's fascinating that he wouldn't speak to the other brother, although it wasn't the brother's fault at all.

ALFRED LESLIE: I had nothing to do with anyone in my family. I stopped speaking to my brother.

AVIS BERMAN: Your own brother?

ALFRED LESLIE: My own brother. He was five years old. He went into the Navy at 17 years old; I never spoke to him. I saw him once or twice when he came out. He married, remained married until he died about 10 years ago. I never had anything to do with anyone in my family. As a person, I just simply found it necessary to separate myself from them because the things I thought about, the things I found myself to do, the things that by chance I stumbled on and entered into, were things that had nothing to do with them. Although in my father's eyes it was something that he understood. What they understood was basically one thing, that I took care of myself and that I did not ask them for anything. I never asked them for a cent or any help whatsoever. When I came out of the service, that was it. I went into the service immediately upon graduation from high school.

AVIS BERMAN: When was your name changed to Leslie?

ALFRED LESLIE: Well, I was—that was an on and off thing, partially because I did a lot of different things in my lifetime. As a very young man, I was a gymnast and I worked. [00:10:00] I had a group of three or four people that I worked with, who—we regarded ourselves as a unit. One guy was a wonderful, wonderful top man named Ernie Divens [ph], and the bottom man was Roy Socola [ph]. And Roy was an amazing bottom man, what they call an understander. This is the most important part. Roy and Ernie were a team, and then I joined them and there was three of us.

Then there was another guy who came into it: a very, very big guy whose name was Robert Domoff, D-O-M-O-F-F. And he was very sophisticated. He was a very different person. He didn't live in our neighborhood. I still to this day did not know how we came to know each other. I think it was because I had—when I was 11 or 12 years old, was living with my family at the end of the 241st Street-Sixth Avenue line or whatever it was, in a place called 1161 Rochambeau Avenue. Or maybe it was 1362, I'm not sure. No, it was 1161 Elder Avenue, where I lived for a while, but I think it was 1361 or 1631 Rochambeau Avenue that I lived in, which was at the end of that line, right off Mosholu Parkway.

There was a former reservoir three blocks away, which apparently—I think it happened during La Guardia's functioning as the mayor, that it was transformed into really a glorious park. [00:12:06] The whole center had turned into a football, the sides of it there were tennis courts, and in one corner of it was a place where there was swings but also a pair of parallel bars and two sets of high bars, and when I was about 11 or 12 years old, when I found myself—I don't remember how, but probably it was because I built model airplanes at that time and sometimes would take to the football field when no one was there and flew the planes I built there—I saw this man named Kimon Voyages, who was—nowadays is scorned, where people ridicule him.

But Kimon was a bodybuilder and had won a number of serious so-called competitions. And he earned his living—came from a Greek family in the fur business—he earned his living working for his father's family as a fur cutter. And I came in one day and I saw this guy doing things on the parallel bars, mostly just ordinary pushups. And he said, "You should do this and I'll show you." So he showed me how to do it, and that was the time I started to discipline myself to train under his encouragement.

At that time, I had just entered high school, Stuyvesant High School, you know. And it was down on 15th Street, where the building is still there now. At that time it was, I believe, the beginning, around the beginning of World War II. So because of the number of students that Stuyvesant had, there were split times that students went in. [00:14:12] The older students went in in the morning, were done at, I think, noon or one o'clock, and the younger students like myself, freshmen up to two years, went in the afternoon session. So that meant I had all morning, quote, to myself. Usually I just painted and made things at home in my room, which I had converted into—since my brother was away, I had this all to myself. It was much the way you see now. And my mother had no problem with it. She said as long as there weren't any mice or anything like that—but we never lived in a place where there was anything like that.

And I just began training. And so I grew up with a spreadsheet, as it were, in which I detailed my activities of a thousand this, a thousand that. And all of this was a schedule, a training schedule that Kimon had set for me. He said you start off doing ten pushups and then you keep adding to it. You first do ten pushups a day and then when you feel stronger, you do three sets, then four sets, and soon you do 10 sets, so you're doing 1,000 a day.

And from that, I understand only now that whatever discipline I had—which is important to do what all of us do; you have to have some sense of that discipline—it was an innate thing, perhaps because of the way my father was, a very disciplined person as an engineer, and my mother. They were both very disciplined but very open people about the way they treated myself and my brother. [00:16:14] Their main thrust was, as I think I already said, bringing us out into the world where we could take care of ourselves, not be a burden on them or anybody else.

AVIS BERMAN: So I guess my question was—so your father never changed his name, you changed?

ALFRED LESLIE: Oh, I'm sorry, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: That's all right, this is all good, I would have asked you anyway.

ALFRED LESLIE: So, when Ernie Divens [ph], Roy Socola [ph] and Bob Domoff [ph] and I were working together, we trained all the time together. And there were moments when we talked

about going on stage, and we thought of different names that we might call ourselves. None of it was any serious. We were just, you know, teenagers, passing ideas around, whatever.

Well, at this particular time in my life, besides what I was doing at home and everything, I had a girlfriend named Flora Loebel, L-O-B-E-L [*sic*], who eventually became my first wife, in 1948 I think, or something like that. Her father, Hymie Loebel was—I think he was Ukrainian or Romanian, I don't know—but because of him, I found myself in one of those chance moments in another part of the world. He earned his living as a gambler. That is to say he played poker and pinochle. And he also had earned his basic living with a floor-waxing machine. [00:18:11] So I started going around with Hymie at night, three nights after school. When I finished after school or whatever I was doing, we would go out and we would go to different places, clean the offices and everything else.

One of the offices that I cleaned was the office of a lawyer who was—I remember this instant in time very, very clearly. He was sort of a Budd Schulberg, Budd Schulbergian character, very eager to get business and draw you in. So he was talking about this and that and so forth and so on, and then he said, "What do you do? What do you do this?" This is all the time while I'm on my hands and knees scrubbing the boundaries of the floor and picking up after him, because he was really a pig in the way he took care of his place. Worse than you see my studio now, but he had no excuse for it. [They laugh.]

So, we're doing all this and I'm telling him about my stuff that I'm doing with Ernie, Roy, and Bob Domoff, hand balancing, and that we're thinking of calling ourselves—working together as a group—The Leslie Brothers. So he says, "Well, you know it's not a good idea just to go on using a name that's not your real name, but the best way to do it is to change your name legally and then there are no problems with any financial issues." I mean, it was bullshit, completely. [00:20:03] So he said, "Five dollars and I can do it for you." And that was it. I changed my name from Lippitz to Leslie, that was it.

When I entered the art world, however, I started—I had my first show as Alfred Leslie, and then I decided I was going to change my name back to Lippitz, because I really didn't want the name Leslie. And then at that time, I was doing house painting and carpentry jobs. I was at Leo Castelli's, and Leo and I and Ileana were talking and everything, and he was complaining about Mike Goldberg changing his name from Mike—I forget the first name that he used in his first show—and Grace Hartigan called herself George Hartigan and all of that. And I said, "Well, I'm going to change my name back to Lippitz." And he said, "No, God!" He said, "This is too confusing. Leave it. There's nothing wrong"—and so I left it, and that was it. And that was how I got the name of Leslie.

AVIS BERMAN: Right. Was your father disturbed that you had changed your name?

ALFRED LESLIE: No, no, not at all. In the situation where he was brought up, he knew nothing about his background. He did not know even where his mother and father had come from, so the man apparently had abandoned the family at that so-called memorial divorce portrait that that woman had taken. But over the years, when various people came to my studio and they would ask me what my original name was and I would say Lippitz, they would say, "Well, you must be German, your family must have come from Austria."

When the Web came in, I found there were a hundred million Alfred Lippitzes in Canada and in Austria. In Vienna, at this moment a football player named Alfred Lippitz. [00:22:13] So apparently, whatever the roots are that my grandmother and my grandfather—as far as I can understand in that sense, came together somewhere around that point of time. I have no idea and I never did any kind of research on it.

AVIS BERMAN: Now, your father certainly could draft or could draw. So he probably—you know, you were artistic from the beginning. Evidently you always drew.

ALFRED LESLIE: Oh, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Was your mother supportive of that too?

ALFRED LESLIE: She was supportive of everything that I did. My father was determined to try to earn a living. The biggest problem that he faced—he had tremendous skills besides his discipline; his drawings were spectacular. And I learned basically how to draw in that sense—if there was a way you would learn how to draw—seeing my father every night come home from whatever job he had, sitting at the dining room table, laying out all these papers, and training,

and setting up problems for him to solve, and making the drawings for it. So all of that came natural to me, and however discipline comes to a person, that was something that was built into me, whatever the DNA that I have. Also, it was the passion that artists have, or people like ourselves who write and do certain things: you create this kind of identity perhaps, for yourself, and then you move towards it and define yourself and that's who you become. [00:24:11] It's all chance.

AVIS BERMAN: Yeah, but it's astonishing that it seems that your father was able to, you know, express affection despite this terrible, this shocking upbringing.

ALFRED LESLIE: Well, it was a shocking upbringing but it was also the continuation of anti-Semitism in the workplace. Because in trying to get work as a draftsman, from the time he was 15 or 16 years old, when he left the Hebrew Free Technical Institute, he was hobbled at the jobs he could get because the minute they discovered he was Jewish, he wasn't hired.

I myself experienced that one very clearly when my friend Tom Guarino and I—who was an Italian and Catholic—we would go around, we would go to a place like Rikers [ph], to get a job together as busboys. They would hire Tom and they wouldn't hire me. This happened at a dozen different places. The only place we ever went together, [laughs] that we were both hired at the same time, was Horn & Hardart's, where we both worked for a time as busboys.

AVIS BERMAN: Now, also I know that when you were a boy you had ear infections. And I guess you began to become deaf then? Is that correct?

ALFRED LESLIE: Yeah, well, I had these ear infections, the kind—do you have children?

AVIS BERMAN: No.

ALFRED LESLIE: No.

AVIS BERMAN: But I used to have ear—I know what they are, but thankfully, I was cured.

ALFRED LESLIE: Well, I had these. And in my generation as a child, when you woke up at night with this stuff pouring out of your ear, there was hardly anything that could be done. That is, I suppose, the source that I had of my hearing impairment. But I never considered myself hearing impaired, or at the same time where I never considered it, I recognized that I had it. [00:26:16]

How I overcame it was simply a mixture of things: trying to figure out what the fuck was going on at the moment, and also taking over the situation as quickly as I could, to direct the conversation in a path that I would have some sense of what the other person was talking about.

After a while, I became actually sort of skillful about it and it became a joke within myself, because of the way I would do things, especially when I was on a panel and I couldn't understand what anybody was talking about, could not understand a word. That's when I began to be more inventive, but it fit in with my abilities to grasp the moment and live in it and accept it and deal with it. I never felt pity for myself or anything like that. And it wasn't until I was about 50 or so—it was actually Helen who urged me, because when I would be eating dinner with my—I guess it was—not with Grace, but with Lisa Bigelow, who was my wife at the time—she and Helen were great friends—

AVIS BERMAN: I'm just saying for the tape, Helen Frankenthaler. Because you just said Helen, so I'm just saying which one it is.

ALFRED LESLIE: Oh, yes, yes. She was good friends with them and we often had dinner with Helen and Bob. They came from similar enough backgrounds. They had a connection via—Lisa's family was, like, the Bigelows of Boston. [00:28:08] Her father's wife was married to the guy who was the publisher of Harry Crosby. And Harry Crosby—

AVIS BERMAN: Harry and Caresse Crosby.

ALFRED LESLIE: Yes.

AVIS BERMAN: Black Sun Press.

ALFRED LESLIE: That's right, and Harry had committed suicide with Lisa's father's wife, who continued to have a relationship with Crosby after she had separated from him, and that was a terrible thing that had entered into his life. And when I met Caresse Crosby, Lisa, she cried.

Caresse Crosby! And she was like a matriarch. And do you know how I came to meet her? She got in touch with me. She wanted to be one of the distributors of *Pull My Daisy*. Give me a break! Don't ask me how or why or anything like that.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, she was avant-garde in her day and very radical.

ALFRED LESLIE: Yes, she was a *grande dame*, you know. She was.

AVIS BERMAN: She probably missed that time so much, that this was a way.

ALFRED LESLIE: Yeah.

AVIS BERMAN: Anyway, so do you feel that the deafness influenced your work?

ALFRED LESLIE: No, no. All that happened, I moved forward independent of what I heard. I interpreted everything in terms of what I saw. Plus, the fact is that, as I say, I'll say "Chance, chance, chance, chance," over and over again, how these things happened to me in my neighborhood and where I was. I'll give you an example. [00:30:00]

When I was in like fourth or fifth grade, my skills were acknowledged by my art teachers. The first instance of it was—and this gives you an idea of who my brother was, when I must have been like seven years old. We were given a project, to make a map of South America and then letter in the names of various products and paste something or other. So I went to Woolworth's at the time and I bought a kind of material that I love, oak tag. I got a big sheet of oak tag and I made a big map, okay? And then I drew the very carefully detailed map of South America and pasted all the projects in it and I brought this in.

When we got to the thing with everybody and I brought this thing in, the teacher asked me to come upstairs, in front of the class, and she said, "This is not right for you to do. This is a project that is supposed to be carried out by you and no one else." So I said, "No one helped me." She said, "You're lying! It is not possible that you could do this." Well, I go home for lunch [laughs] and my mother said, "How did your teacher like it?" [Laughs.] I said, "She didn't like it, she called me a liar and she made fun of me." My mother, out of the door—we lived at 1316, 1641, I don't remember.

AVIS BERMAN: This is in the Bronx.

ALFRED LESLIE: In the Bronx. Elder Avenue, three blocks, I suppose it was, west of Bruckner Boulevard. The public school I went to was on the other side, and the bridge over the Bronx River had just been built; I remember seeing Mayor La Guardia at the opening of the bridge. [00:32:10] My mother, at lunchtime, went over, walked into the classroom and humiliated the woman and dragged her to the principal's office and forced her to apologize.

So this is who she was. She was always—as I said before, both she and my parents wanted my brother and I to be able to go out into the world, do no harm, and take care of yourself, and that was basically it. So whatever my brother became—followed in my father's footsteps as a consultant engineer in his business, and was like that until he died.

AVIS BERMAN: I just want to tie up one thread. You were saying that Helen Frankenthaler must—did she suggest some remedy for your deafness?

ALFRED LESLIE: Oh, yes, I'm sorry, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: That's all right.

ALFRED LESLIE: Helen and Bob kept saying to me, "Look, you really have to get something." And I said, "Well, I've gone to various places, and look, all they can do is they give you like a little miniaturized radio, which is like a beetle that you stick inside of your ear and you can't hear a fucking thing, it's all distorted."

Now, at that time, I was only concerned about one ear, when it was really both ears that were not functioning properly. And it wasn't basically until I met Nancy, my wife now—and I've been married to her now for 27 years. When we met, I was still only wearing one hearing aid in one ear, because I didn't have enough money to pay for a second hearing aid, and she insisted that I do it. [00:34:00] And then when I began to wear two hearing aids, it changed the way I functioned in the world. I was able to relate to people in terms of what they were saying, not as the way I pushed the conversation around, which I've described in many instances when I was in

a public place, you know, on a panel or something like that.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, and you know, all of that probably made you a very good film director in terms of, as you say, all of that kind of thinking.

ALFRED LESLIE: No.

AVIS BERMAN: No?

ALFRED LESLIE: No. Cinema has to do with your own inner directive-ness in terms of storytelling and being able to bring people together. That's why it was very easy for me—like, when I went into the Coast Guard in 1945, within 15 minutes of my being in a particular platoon, without even knowing it, and this is before I had hearing aids, all of these guys voted me as the platoon leader. So I had demonstrated, at different times in my life, this unawareness, which I never peddled or tried to sell, but it just happened.

And that happened in every aspect of my life, that I've always—and it's only recently I've discovered this aspect of myself, when Barbara Rose wrote an essay for my show at the Blaffer and she called me a humanist in a technological age, and I said to my wife Nancy—I said, "A humanist? I'm a humanist?" She said, "You don't know this about yourself?" She said, "You put yourself always in harm's way to protect other people." [00:36:04] I never realized that.

AVIS BERMAN: Something that I find really—were there any mentors in terms of the arts for you?

ALFRED LESLIE: No.

AVIS BERMAN: Teachers, anyone that really had encouraged you?

ALFRED LESLIE: No, I didn't have any [phone rings]—going to let it go.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay.

ALFRED LESLIE: I didn't have any mentors, I didn't have any heroes. But again, chance brought me into the world that I felt most comfortable in. Because of my physical condition during World War II—and then I was too young to go into the military—I found work as an artists' model. I would go into the art schools, and when I modeled, I immediately somehow connected to the people. And then I met Ivan Olinsky, Frank DuMond, Reginald Marsh, all of the people—

AVIS BERMAN: At the League.

ALFRED LESLIE: —at the Art Students League. And because of my knowledge of anatomy, sometimes I was assisting Robert Beverly Hale in his anatomy class. And when I occasionally modeled at Pratt Institute, one of the anatomy teachers always wanted me because I knew how to draw the body, and as a bodybuilder, I knew all the parts of the body. And he could say, "Would you do this here? This and this, or do this or that?" And he found that I was very special to be able to have.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, and you also had very visible musculature too.

ALFRED LESLIE: Oh, yeah, I was very well-built. You know, when I see pictures of myself, I still can't believe I ever looked like that, but I did. [00:38:05] But this was how I met all of these people—again, just by chance. So when I was at the Art Students League, I immediately became friends in a way that a person 17 years old can be a friend of the older artist, because they acknowledged me. They saw, from the things that I had happened to have with me—because I was on my way to someplace and I was carrying something—something that they saw was there.

At one point, I was working and taking a late afternoon class. The Art Students League had classes that were morning, afternoon, and then into late afternoon classes before evening classes. I never took any classes there but because I was working afternoon and evening, and I had this gap in between, I took a watercolor class with John McPherson. And McPherson acknowledged me as someone who had natural abilities with managing watercolor, which he saw as the most difficult of mediums, that even people who have the most sophisticated ability handling oil painting have difficulty in managing the nuances of watercolor. And so I became a sometimes assistant in his class.

AVIS BERMAN: When you were young also, you were painting, you were taking photographs, you were writing. I mean, you had this total freedom. [00:40:05]

ALFRED LESLIE: I just did it as a natural thing. I bought my first movie camera as an accident, when Mr. Loebel and I were cleaning the floors in a building, in an office building on Fifth Avenue. And there was a photography store at Fifth Avenue and I think 32nd Street, a very famous photography store. And while I was pushing the machine to the job, I stopped in and there was a movie camera that was on sale. Or—it wasn't on sale, it was in the window, a used camera. And then I just walked in and bought it and began to shoot film. That's how I met Tom Guarino, who did not live in my neighborhood but he had become a, quote, cinematographer in the same way that I had, stumbling into it by chance.

AVIS BERMAN: Another question was—you know, you went to high school, you got an award, you had a scholarship to Pratt. Why didn't you take it?

ALFRED LESLIE: Well, when I won the art award—and actually, a very famous director, theater director, movie director—

AVIS BERMAN: Erwin Piscator?

ALFRED LESLIE: No, no. I mean, someone my generation that I went—in school, which was up for the prize, the art prize when we graduated. Oh, he directed—oh, God—his name will come to me in a second. He went on to Hollywood and became a—Becker, Harold Becker! Harold. [00:42:02] Harold Becker directed *The Onion Field*, a number of films, very good, a very gifted man, and he was a very good friend of mine, of a young painter who helped me sometimes when I was doing some of my film projects; a guy who died from alcohol, from his drinking about 10 years ago, whose name will come to me in a minute. But Harold was there.

Now, I won the prize and I was given the scholarship to Pratt Institute. Now, Pratt Institute at that time was a very serious kind of a school, but they had a certain kind of dress code, okay? Now, before I went into my interview, my art teacher at the time was a wonderful woman named Gilmore, Mrs.—I don't remember her first name. But she had been a student of Henry [Charles W.] Hawthorne's in Provincetown, and before I went in for the interview she said, "What are you going to wear?" And I said, "What I always wear." And she said—in some way or another she said, "That's not a good idea." Well, I had pegged pants, a long keychain, I wore suede shoes, I was mister cool man hipster.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, a zoot suit.

ALFRED LESLIE: Yeah. I have a picture of myself at that time with Tom Guarino and one of my friends, just before I went into the Army. But she said, "Don't dress like that."

So when I went in for my interview, I saw all these guys sitting around with dark suits on, white shirts and dark red ties, just the way you were at an assembly. I was completely an outsider. [00:44:17] So when I went in there, they said, "Well, you are going into the Army?" I said, "Yes, I'm enlisting." She said, "Well then, we'll just give you"—they just didn't want me when they saw what I looked like. I was, at that time, a creature from the deep, and I was not the right kind of person that they wanted to admit to the school. So they said, "You're going into the Army and we'll just give your space over to someone who can use it." And that was the end of it.

AVIS BERMAN: So you didn't turn it down. Well, it wasn't a good fit but they weren't interested.

ALFRED LESLIE: It wasn't a good fit but they didn't want me. And the same way when I tried to—before I went to Stuyvesant, I tried to get into Cooper Union and they rejected me because they didn't like my drawings. Who the hell knows why? I don't know. But, you know, I got into Stuyvesant because I was good at math and whatever it is that that was. It was just natural to me, an easy examination to pass.

AVIS BERMAN: Yeah, the question—well, you enlisted presumably after you finished school, so that would have been May or June 1945?

ALFRED LESLIE: The war ended when I was in boot camp.

AVIS BERMAN: Yeah, because I was going to say, the war was—

ALFRED LESLIE: Middle of the summer, the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. I was in boot camp

in Manhattan Beach. And because during wartime all of the naval services are integrated, and the Coast Guard—which actually belonged to the Treasury Department in peacetime—was turned over to the Navy. [00:46:09] The minute the war ended, the U.S. Navy wanted to get rid of all these extra financial obligations and turned the Coast Guard back to the Treasury Department. So they went around and said, "Who of you are going to reenlist and become permanent members of the Coast Guard?" Those of us who said they weren't were given the earliest discharge possible. So I was discharged nine months and 16 days after my enlistment, and that gave me educational benefits. The educational benefits were one year plus time served. So that's how I was able to finance and take care of myself when I came out of the service.

AVIS BERMAN: Yeah, because you had the GI Bill. Were you enlisting to get the GI Bill? I mean, why did you decide to enlist? I mean, you weren't drafted, in other words.

ALFRED LESLIE: I put myself in harm's way, which is part of my nature. My wife said it's good, I would never have survived. Because even when I was in boot camp, I volunteered for the most unimaginable things. There was a point in time when we were doing training on Staten Island, something fell into the water, the most disgusting water you can imagine, off the pier. I can barely swim; my idea of swimming was an orange-colored pool in high school or something like that. [00:48:00] I hated the ocean, I hated the idea of standing in a river where there's all that stuff on the bottom. I was purely an urban spirit. And I jumped in that filthy water, tried to rescue what was in it and they had to pull me out. So it's who I was on impulse.

The most recent example of that was when some people broke into my building on 13th Street, when I still had my studio there. When I found these thieves waiting in the elevator when the elevator came up, I realized that all the people in the building were at risk. And knowing who they were—they were mostly widows who were older than I was—I decided to get these guys out of the building. So I got into the elevator with them and managed to get them out of the building. And the only reason I got them out of the building—because they thought I was crazy. And what was at the very last minute, I had spirited them out in the elevator by telling them all kinds of things; I was going to help them go where they wanted to go. The elevator had a keyed system. They had broken into the front door of the building, walked in and got into the elevator, and what they did was they pushed a button. Pushing the button got them nowhere unless you had a key, but at that moment—again, chance—I was pushing the button on the eighth floor and when the elevator opened they were in there. And so I had to decide to leave these guys in there and try to get the police, putting at risk all these people in the building who would not deal with it the way that I would. [00:50:11] Somebody would call the elevator at that time, open, and see these two thugs in there. So I got in and I got them out of the building. So that's how I function, for good or bad. It's a character flaw.

AVIS BERMAN: To me it wasn't about harm's way. It was, to me, thinking that maybe you didn't have a temperament that would be for the military, because you are so individual.

ALFRED LESLIE: No. Of course they immediately accepted me and gave me a position of authority. I had no trouble with the military at all. The only problem was that of course I wanted to do what I wanted to do. I wasn't in there long enough. I loved being aboard ship. I was aboard the Coast Guard Cutter *Galatea*. I loved the guys that I worked with, I loved everything about the sea. I loved the shipboard life. I didn't mind it at all. I got along with all of the officers, partially because, in one sense, given who I was, even with my, quote, lack of education,—and I was the youngest one aboard ship—I related most easily to the officers there, because for whatever it was temperamentally, I was able to communicate with them.

I was clearly, as I see it now, a different person from all of the other people. I was only 17 years old, so to me they did not—none of the people represented any kind of a threat. You know, they were just people and I was used to dealing with all kinds of people. [00:52:03] When I was 16 or 17 years old, my future wife Flora Loebel's father, Hymie, Herman, whatever, said—and maybe you've read this elsewhere—told us that his family and my wife-to-be that his second cousin, Saul Colin, was coming to visit. His boss, he said, had died. Do you know the story?

AVIS BERMAN: No. It was a name that comes up, so I was going to ask you.

ALFRED LESLIE: Yes. That his boss had died and that he was now working for someone else and had come to the United States with him, and that he missed seeing him. He remembers the times they had spent in the Ukraine or wherever it was they grew up. As I remember it, Loebel saying something like "playing in the fields of" whatever it was. And when he invited—Hymie invited

this man to the house, and I helped him paint the apartment and make it neat for him. He had no idea who he was, and when I went to answer the door, there was this guy dressed like he was on—what is it, that row?—Savile Row in London. And his name was Saul Colin.

And Saul had been Pirandello's secretary; not only his secretary but his right-hand person who helped him produce his films. [00:54:02] He was a great—an extraordinary, enterprising young man. And when Pirandello died, Colin went to work as an assistant for Maria and Erwin Piscator, who were Brecht's coworkers, people who worked with Brecht and were partners in advancing the avant-garde German theater. So here I was, meeting Colin and then going to dinner with Colin when he found out I was a young artist, and saw some of the pictures of mine that hung in Loebel's apartment, going to dinner with Erwin and Maria Piscator, attending, sitting in on classes that Colin gave and that Piscator gave, going to the theaters.

So these were, again, chance elements that were dropped in place. So by the time I came into New York University, in this moment that I described to you, meeting Tony Smith, I had had all these peripheral experiences. Again, all just like—

AVIS BERMAN: What did that—in, you know, 1947 or so, just before you get to—those paintings on the wall—what did your early work look like?

ALFRED LESLIE: It was the beautiful watercolors that I made. Mrs. Gilmore said to me and this guy—the filmmaker, Harold Becker—she said, "You guys are the most gifted, and what you have to do if you're going to continue to do this, you have to remember to make at least one picture every day." [00:56:05] So no matter where I went—I don't know what Harold did, I never asked him, although I saw him at Jerry Shore's funeral—a friend of mine who became Harold Becker's film partner for a while—but I did this, I traveled around, wherever I went, to work out, whatever, I always carried a small set of watercolors in a bag, and I made watercolors of landscapes.

And for my drawing skills, I did what I did. I was just doing what I did all my life. I drew, I painted, I wrote stories, I wrote songs, I went down to the Brill Building and tried to sell my songs, even though I did not even know how to score music. I didn't know how to play the piano, I just wrote the lyrics. A young woman in the building who lived below me, the last name was Snyder, had a boyfriend who worked in the Brill Building who said he would listen to my music. So I went down with her, but it wasn't an instance where he wanted to hear my songs [laughs] at all. All he and this young woman wanted to do was get off by themselves while I sat there banging on the piano, trying to do my stuff.

But this was what I did. I had a great English teacher named Lowenthal at Stuyvesant, and when he read the stories that I wrote and that I read in front of the class, he said I should become a writer. Those were things that—again, I didn't curry ambition. I never curried ambition. I was never interested in a career. Never. I never wanted to make money. [00:58:11] All I wanted to do was find time [laughs] to make things. And so, making things—if I had to wash a floor to get a place to live, [laughs] I just strategized in a way that made it possible.

So when I met Grace Hartigan at the time when she separated from Harry Jackson, Harry had come out of the service as a wounded veteran, so he had an income from the government. And Harry was a different kind of a person. He was much more mature about the world and everything than I was. I was interiorized in my own special way, for whatever the reasons were. And when Grace and I got together and we moved into the first loft that we had together, which was Essex and Hester Street—the building is still there, on the top floor.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, that's where the market is and the Tenement Museum and all of that there.

ALFRED LESLIE: No, I don't think so.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay.

ALFRED LESLIE: This is right across the street from Seward Park.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, okay, yeah.

ALFRED LESLIE: And the building still stands. The only difference is they put small windows in, instead of the big windows. This is a photograph of me sitting there that was taken quite by accident, by a couple that were living below Grace and I—John Reed, who took this photograph of me in my studio. We moved in, we did not have hot water, it was nothing. It was an empty loft. It had been formerly a sewing machine factory, and the old machines were still there and

there was no toilet, there was no—the running water came—was a single, cold water. No heat, no electricity. [01:00:09] We cleared out the space and I bought Coleman lanterns and a Coleman stove, and set it up so that we could have electricity.

The people who lived downstairs below were all immigrants who recognized how we lived. So when they saw in the middle of the winter that we had no heat, they got together and gave us a stove, a coal-burning stove. Eventually, a guy in the neighborhood, an electrician, came and volunteered and put in electricity. But we lived for a year without hot water, and we bathed. We went to the hardware store and bought a big metal tub and we heated up water on the Coleman stove, poured it in, and we bathed. And we both supported ourselves modeling and my doing carpentry jobs and stuff like that for people.

AVIS BERMAN: I'm just going to backtrack slightly.

ALFRED LESLIE: Sure, I'm sorry, I go on.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, no, no, it's perfectly—you know, because I want to do that education and Tony Smith.

ALFRED LESLIE: Sure.

AVIS BERMAN: So obviously, you and Flora split up and divorced. And then also, before you met Grace, were you married to Esta then? Esta Teich?

ALFRED LESLIE: No, I think I married Esta after I separated from Grace.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay, then we'll leave her until a little later then.

ALFRED LESLIE: Yeah, because that was—in 1953, 1952, I was living on Fourth Street, right off Third Avenue, in a brownstone building that is still there, totally intact. [01:02:11]

AVIS BERMAN: The reason I kind of eventually want to bring up Esta is, eventually, because, you know, she ended up marrying Hilton Kramer.

ALFRED LESLIE: Yeah. She was working at the time for some kind of a service, some kind of a telephone service or something, which calls people and tries to get them to buy things. One of the people who was working alongside of whom was Allen Ginsberg, and I had met Allen earlier on with a girlfriend that I had briefly, in 1949. And where I met that whole group of people at a party across the street from where Edwin Denby and Rudy Burckhardt were living.

AVIS BERMAN: Well, all I have to say is that's the funniest—I'm containing myself, thinking of Allen Ginsberg as a telephone solicitor.

ALFRED LESLIE: Yeah. Well, he was young, but the reason that he became—I believe that Allen became friendly with Esta and eventually me—was mainly because he thought we were open territory. He had not yet declared himself, which I thought was a wonderful thing for him to do. It was very, very difficult. It really isolated him at that time and it was extremely courageous. He was a perfectly extraordinary human being. So when he came to visit us, he may have had his ideas, what was going to happen, but it wasn't ours, and nothing untoward, unpleasant, or anything happened at all. Except that we expected him to go home and he did eventually. [They laugh.] [01:04:10] We were living in Hoboken at that time, 22 Hudson Place, right across the street from the Hudson Tubes.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay, well, let's just go back at the moment. From your GI Bill, you enrolled in NYU in I think 1947. And so I think we should discuss Tony Smith, your relationship, his impact on you, because I think that was important.

ALFRED LESLIE: Oh, yeah. Well, Tony was great, mainly because just like the—I mean, he was only 15 years older than I was. And Tony was great because he saw in me and Tom Guarino what he saw and knew in himself, just as the artists—the older artists that I met at the Art Students League, like Reginald Marsh and those artists who acknowledged me, who saw me as a particular kind of focused outsider, on a particular path. So they recognized that.

The art department at that time, I don't know if we ever got into this, but stop me—the art department at the time, it was again chance that brought Tony into it. At the end of the war, NYU—which was a secondary institution of no particular consequence whatsoever, had not become what it eventually became, a real estate [laughs] university—had an art department

that—one was a real so-called art department that was uptown, belonging to the art history department, and then the other so-called art department was in the Education Building, which was only two blocks away from where I was living on Fourth Street. [01:06:13] In other words, I could walk out of the building—I can show you a photograph of where I was living—walk out of my building, which was on Fourth Street and off Sixth Avenue, walk up past Washington Square Park and here was my fucking—you know, I was getting my money from the government.

My going there was for one reason only. I loathed the academic life, I really did. It was irrational, because I love literature, but most of the time academics to me are always on the wrong side of literature, on the wrong side. They're always on the wrong side because they're dealing with the things that they find incomprehensible. They follow a path which they have been given, [stamps feet] they stamp their feet and they run along the tracks, and anything that veers off the track gets them upset. Now that's my view of the academic world. Right or wrong, I'm not going to bother you to defend it, that is simply what I think, okay.

So when I found that this school was there and my money was running out for the GI Bill that I had, because I was getting \$30 a month I think it was—whatever you call it, \$30 a week club that GIs got, I think I'm remembering what it was—I realized I had to get money and I ran into a guy I had been in boot camp with, sitting in Washington Square Park. He said, "Why don't you go to school?" [01:08:04] I said, "Why the fuck should I go to school? I don't want to go to school." He said, "It's a good way to get money." Incidentally, this—what I did, I subsequently learned is what Kerouac and many other people did at that time.

So I found out that the so-called art department was an art history department, on 180th Street, and there was the art education department. So I went in and tried to figure out what it was that I had to do to enroll there, for only one reason, which was to collect my benefits of the GI Bill, which as I said before, was one year plus time served. So one year, nine months, and 16 days, which I would get money from the government, and then I would leave, which I actually did. So I found out what I had to do. And I found out that because of the way I left high school, I had skipped certain tests that I had to take in order to qualify for whatever—the things that they had. And so I went and took whatever the tests were, got them out of the way, went up there.

Now, at that point in time, the art department was run by a theater person named Ross. He was a really nice man, very distinguished looking and everything, and he ran the art department. But when the war ended, suddenly he was faced with a student body that he didn't know how to deal with, people my age who had been, quote, in the world, maybe even had seen prostitutes, and 15- and 16- and 17-year-olds fresh out of high school that have never been in bed with a man or a woman, perhaps except when they were 11 years old, when they were struggling and finding their sexual identity and who knows what. [01:10:23] So there was that mix. And then there were some people who were much older, maybe 15 years older, 10 years older, like Robert Goodnough.

And for Dr. Ross, for all of his wonderful qualities, it wasn't a mix that he was prepared for. So somebody, somebody, God knows who, understood what was happening and found a man named Robert Iglehart, an amazing creature. Bob was a painter himself, influenced more or less by the Kandinsky formalist—sort of a French-style formalist, Russian, lived I believe in the Middle West, brought him in as the chairman of the—he was going to run the art department. So whereas Dr. Ross's idea—people are being trained to be art educators. Mind you, this is the art education department, not the art department, which is uptown, which is telling people how to—which are art historians learning how to paint in order to be art historians.

AVIS BERMAN: Dreadful. [Laughs.]

ALFRED LESLIE: So Bob Iglehart comes in and he says, "We're going to have an art department, we are going to get real artists in to teach." [01:12:00] So, Dr. Ross goes back, concentrating on his theater work and in comes Tony Smith, Bill Baziotis, and I believe Hale Woodruff, and then another artist named Carl O. Podzus, P-O-D-Z-U-S.

Now, of the three, the two that—I related to all of them with no problem, mainly because I was an outsider in my head, who was only walking in the door to walk out of the door. I was taking classes and as I enrolled in the class, just before I got there, I would go to the person teaching the class and I said, "Look, I don't mean to be disrespectful, but I'm not interested in what you're teaching. I'm only coming here to attend the class. I will listen but I won't do anything, I won't say anything, and all I would do is hope to get a passing grade, that's all. All I want to do is collect my money from the GI Bill." Was that some kind of crazy? [Laughs.] I don't know, it never

occurred to me even now. To me it was the perfectly natural thing to do. I was being straightforward.

AVIS BERMAN: You were being honest.

ALFRED LESLIE: Yes, I was being honest. All of the people except one accepted. And this guy, I don't remember his name, but he went off the wall. He took it as a personal affront. So anyway, that's the way I functioned and then all of a sudden, I was in this art department with these very sympathetic guys.

Because here was Tony, Tony in his bloom, just having come from studying with Frank Lloyd Wright, infused with James Joyce, who at the moment that he snapped his fingers, he could recite James Joyce's *Anna Livia Plurabelle* with Joyce's voice, his voice rising a pitch or two higher than it usually was, with a Joycean accent and with this vast treasury of memories about being brought up very rich, traveling with his father in a Rolls Royce convertible through the slums during the Depression; and sitting on the beach in New Jersey, where his father owned all this beachfront property, on sand, on sculptor's special casting sand, which during the Depression his father had shipped in and dumped there. [01:14:57] But at the same time, he was Hebraicist [ph], he believed in ecstasy, he loved the Hasidim. He was crazy for the Hasidim, and he dressed sometimes as if he was a high Hasidic rabbi.

So when I met Tony, coming up in the elevator at the same time, I first thought—he had a light-colored beard, tiny steel-rimmed glasses—the way you would see on a German doctor, a German academic—and wearing, as a jacket, kind of a cotton wrap that a druggist might wear. You know, one of those [laughs] light-colored things—

AVIS BERMAN: Like a pharmacist, a white coat.

ALFRED LESLIE: [Laughs.]

AVIS BERMAN: Yeah, a short white coat.

ALFRED LESLIE: And then he looked at me and here I was, mister hipster, wearing pegged pants, which I wore because I didn't want to—and he said, "So you're a construction worker, what are you doing here?" [01:16:05] So I said—[laughs]. He said, "Only construction workers have pants like that." He did not connect them to my being a zoot suiter. So anyway, we immediately connected.

And then, when I was drawn into the department there, the people who I connected easily with was Tony, Hale Woodruff, and Bill Baziotos. Baziotos was a wonderful, wonderful, underappreciated artist. Bill was unfortunately drinking very, very heavily, and half the time he would come in slightly on the edge, smelling of alcohol. Most of the people in the department had no idea who and what Tony and Bill Baziotos and Hale Woodruff stood for.

Hale, at that time—I don't know if you know his work—was the only black professor in the department. He was still influenced by Tom Benton. And at the time, when painters painted like Tom Benton, people said, "Oh, this is someone influenced by Tom Benton." Now, when Hale's paintings are seen, nobody even knows who the fuck Tom Benton is. So he's not influenced by Tom Benton; he is the artist who—this is his style. This is, of course, the changes in the culture of attribution of the way these things work.

So Tony and I became very fast friends. [01:18:00] He took me, or I went with Bob Goodnough and Tom Guarino—though Tom was beginning to be ill at the time. He died a few years later. He had cancer of the rectum, something that he had been suffering with since I knew him as a teenager but he didn't even know he had it. And he was in the throes of all of this, trying to deal with this and big family problems because his mother had an unexpected pregnancy. As a Catholic, she would not have an abortion, so all of a sudden there was a new baby and Tom was trying to deal with all of these things. So myself, Rob Goodnough, and Tony became very close friends, as close as one can be, given, in a sense, how artificial our relationship was.

But through Tony, Goodnough and I entered the mainstream of the culture of painting at that time. And through Baziotos. So we would go someplace to—I forget who this woman was, who was a great maker of parties, who had some money, and she was—she gave a party and we could—every artist who was not considered a leftover representational artist of the '30s, of whom the issues against them was not so much realist thought, but their left-wing politics. And what the older painters like Tony and I—that Tony represented to me—were artists who rejected

politics altogether, seeing what had happened. Because the Left at that time, much as the Left is today, is telling you what to do. You know, it's either you're making a picture that fits in with what they want, like that young woman who tried to get that artist at the Whitney Museum annual—she said that their work should be destroyed. [01:20:33]

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ALFRED LESLIE: Because it didn't fit in with her political convictions. She was insulting the black community by painting a picture of the open casket of this poor young man who had been murderously dismembered by these savages.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, it was a painting of Emmett Till.

ALFRED LESLIE: Emmett Till, yeah.

So this is what they stood for. And there's a statement that I made, which I can send you when my computer comes back up, that I made for a Beat Generation show, which—I talk about—the culture of the time was to sort of stay away from the political, the politics of the time, seeing that the politicians were ultimately people, the worst of the worst, who can be drawn into positions of power, seizing power to do the most nefarious things and not to be—in general, not to be trusted. You know, they say one thing and they do something else.

This was something that suited all of us at that time and it suited almost all of the older painters that I met. And again, that's Rothko, that's Clyfford Still, that's de Kooning, that's Baziotes, that's Motherwell, that's Tomlin, that's Clyfford, you know, that's Jackson, that was all of them. That was the world that Tony and Baziotes, Bob Goodnough, and myself basically—into. [01:22:20]

Now, one of the things that had happened, there had been—which you know already—the Subjects of the Artist School which had been taking place in a loft on Eighth Street, opposite I think Thompson Street, on the top floor. When that loft became empty—what's his name, not Woodruff—the guy who was the chairman of the department I just named.

AVIS BERMAN: Iglehart.

ALFRED LESLIE: Iglehart, Bob Iglehart, recognized that for people like myself, Tom Guarino, and a group of other artists that were in the department—that there were no proper facilities for us to paint. There were just these dopey classrooms. For example, I was involved in carving stone at the time also. So Tom Guarino and I borrowed, from the building grounds department, some kind of a facility that—we picked up huge pieces of granite and everything, from buildings that were being torn down, and we would lug them up to the top floor of the art department. We had these stones and we would be chipping away. It was clearly not a situation that gave us the space.

So Iglehart, Baziotes, and Hale realized that the department—in order to grow and for them to be able to foster a better opportunity for the artists—they got together, the three of them: Hale Woodruff, Tony Smith, and Iglehart. And when the Subjects of the Artist School closed—of which I had been attending some of the meetings there that they were having—they rented the space and it became Studio 35; 35 East Eighth Street. [01:24:34] Myself, Tony Smith, Carol Breeze [ph], Tom Guarino, Bob Iglehart—a group of the most committed people who were in the department—took it over mainly and used it as our studio. So Tony painted there, I painted there, everybody painted there. About five of us used it as our studio. A huge, huge loft.

And on Friday nights, the lectures that had been given at the Subjects of the Artist School were continued on Friday nights. So that Bob Goodnough, Tony, and myself, Carol Breeze [ph] and others, would bring up the chairs and bring them down. And eventually, we became panelists on the program. For example, one of the most memorable moments was Cage, when he gave this talk about time and sound in which he stood up—and before he got up his back was to a big open window—he raised the window and all the sounds came in from the outside, he raised his watch, and he said something like, "It is exactly two minutes after 1:00 p.m.," then sits for a moment, and all you could hear were the sounds of the street and he said, "Thank you" [they laugh] and that was it. [01:26:14]

So there were moments of real high hilarity and also the extraordinary [laughs] personal conflicts that were brought to the floor by all of this group of people that were meeting—all of these meetings, ultimately moving from Studio 35 to what became the so-called Club.

AVIS BERMAN: The Club. And did you—were you active? Were you a member of The Club too?

ALFRED LESLIE: I did not want to be a member of The Club, because I resisted being a member of anything. It was stupid, but I resisted. But I was still part of it, and all of the internal—there's a picture in Manor. You know that place? It was up the last time I was there. It's a photograph that's on the wall that's about 12-feet-high by 16 feet, and it's me, Milton Resnick, Elaine de Kooning—about six other people—in some kind of hodgepodge consultation about something or other, probably figuring out the dynamics of the so-called *Ninth Street Show*, which was something that was in the air because, as you know, at the time there were only a couple of galleries, mostly Charlie Egan and Sam Kootz, who were supportive of the kind of painting that, quote, this group of artists that I became identified with were close to, you know. So. [01:28:04]

AVIS BERMAN: I want to backtrack a little bit.

ALFRED LESLIE: Sure.

AVIS BERMAN: So I'm assuming that once you were involved in the Baziotés, Smith, and Woodruff classes, that maybe you didn't just sit there, maybe you did do things. Am I wrong?

ALFRED LESLIE: Well, I did whatever I wanted to do. For example, when—I did not attend the academic classes, except as I described to you before. But for example, when Dr. Ross had his theater, he was very adamant about getting me especially, to submit something for the thing. I had to design the stage set. So I was like, quote, a friend of Merce Cunningham's, as much of a friend of Merce's as anyone could be who wasn't gay and who wasn't a dancer, because Merce was a passionate person who had an interior life as complex as anyone that you could imagine.

So he said we had to design the stage set, so I thought, "Oh." And he expected us to build a theater, a proscenium, so I got an orange crate and I lined it with four pieces of cardboard and I painted all four pieces of cardboard and the floor piece of cardboard white, so I had an interior white thing. And then when I was out on the street, I found a wonderful piece of twisted wire, all with big—you know, rusted with big—and it was [demonstrates] this big, but once I put it inside the box, the scale had changed, and scale brought it into this marvelous set for a modern dance. [01:30:00] So I submitted that and he gave me a fail! So of all things, [laughs] Tony happened to be there when he saw it and Ross was bitterly complaining to me not doing the project, Tony walks in and says, "Oh, wow!" He said, "Merce would [laughs] love to see this."

So it was a difference. And there, amazingly enough, although I thought nothing existed—there's a picture next to the clock of me working on a piece of sculpture at that time, in Studio 35. How did I get that? One of those chance things. A woman writes me a note, says her husband died, left all these photographs of these people; could I identify who the people were? So I knew who all of them were and there was this picture of me. And that was it, that's the only photograph that I have of myself working at the time, except one or two pictures that Tom Guarino, who stayed working—but half as a painter, mostly as a photographer—until he died, that Tom took of the both of us when he had a darkroom in one part of my studio, when it was in a brownstone on Fourth Street.

AVIS BERMAN: I'll look at that a little later. Since you brought it up, since you attended the Subjects of the Artist, can you discuss that a little bit?

ALFRED LESLIE: Well, I don't have any clear memory, except of the conflicts, [laughs] the conflicts of people arguing amongst each other, which were very exciting. Don't forget, I had no hearing aids at the time, so for me it was just a matter of sounds that were being parsed. And then eventually, the conversations would drift down to me and I would become engaged. [01:32:11] But mainly I knew what they all were talking about. When Ad got up to talk, you know, I knew what Ad was going to talk about. When Bill got up, and he did not want to read what he wrote because he was playing games in his way, and asked Bob Motherwell to read his statement—I was always puzzled by his doing that, because he was the most marvelous writer. He was among the most literate of all the artists that I ever knew. Shrewd, insightful, and lyric in his writings and his statements, you know.

That's why, when I wrote *The Cedar Bar*—when I wrote that, I didn't know what I was writing because I was just trying to compile things that had to do with stuff that was lost during the fire. So when it came to me that what I was doing at some time, all of a sudden, [stamps feet] de Kooning's voice—his voice!—just came to me. Greenberg, his voice, I can virtually—and sometimes can imitate what they say. The memory, the imprint, the memory of their voices and their insights is embedded. It's embedded within me. And it's random, you know.

Like, there was some particular struggle that always went on at Studio 35, and at The Club. And it had to do with a painter named Kaldis, Aristodemos Kaldis. A big adventurer, lyrical painter, who loved to persuade young girls to take off their clothing and pinch them, who was proud of the hairs growing out of his nose and his eyebrows. [01:34:16] He was a lecher, a born lecher, but so charming he got away with all these transgressions, something which few people would tolerate now. But at that time it was just like, if you were a woman being groped in the subway, the woman would take a hairpin out and jab the guy and walk away. It was something that one expected in the public life: people's behavior in the city that you didn't know what the fuck was going on. Many [ph] of the time, there weren't the issues that we deal with today.

Kaldis would always sit in the back, separated from someone else. And then there would be—Bill would talk, and he had a distinctive voice, and you could close your eyes and Bill would talk, saying there's something wrong about this, that, and the other thing. And then all of a sudden you would hear another voice, and you would say, if your eyes were closed, "Is that Bill talking or is that Milton Resnick? Wait, it could be Joop Sanders." Because [laughs] Milton sounded like Bill, and Joop Sanders, also Dutch. And Milton was Russian, but he was so close to Bill that his ideas and his sensibility was close—that frequently, they all were fused together. And then there would be Ad Reinhardt.

So then there would be this thing going on, in which there would be this struggle between various people who would speak and argue contentiously. [01:36:00] Harold Rosenberg would always speak aggressively, stand up, you know, [laughs] in his way. Kaldis, at the very end, when there was all silence, he would get up and he would give a devastating summation, which was, in part, somewhat of the truth of what had been said, but at the same time was—I called it devastating, because everybody would groan. Because when Kaldis [laughs] spoke, he sort of brought the conversation which everybody was engaged in to an end. So frequently, when Kaldis would start to talk, people would try to stop him.

So there were personalities that were—you know, like, Ad was very great in insisting he wasn't interested in art. He was only interested in business. He didn't care about anything about art. All he did was care about money and having an exhibition. He would say, "I don't paint until I know a show is coming up, [laughs] then I paint." Well, of course it wasn't true. There's a beautiful picture of Ad, his wife, and me, and Elaine de Kooning, at the March on Washington, and I can send you a copy when my computer comes back. Ad was always marvelously astute and incisive, and in his way, a very closed man but very expansive in his work and his concerns of issues of people's lives, as you know—about the early, so-called political—what do you want to call them?—editorial drawings, the cartoons.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, the cartoons.

ALFRED LESLIE: I don't know, whatever you want to call them. [01:38:00] They're beautiful and he continued them, of course, up to a point in time, a commentary on the art world at the time. So there was this wonderful mix of people and energy and, at the time, all put in together, everybody having a voice, everybody acknowledging each other, at the same time disagreeing with each other. You know, you didn't have to like somebody's work.

I mentioned to you Helen's work, the word "acknowledgement" was very, very important. You were acknowledged because you were a committed and serious person and that's what counted. And so that was the matrix, that was the flood of things that I was going into.

AVIS BERMAN: Before, I had asked you at a certain point what you were doing and you were talking about the watercolors. At what point did you begin to turn toward, or accept, when abstraction became something?

ALFRED LESLIE: Now that comes into the whole dynamics of what I like to think of—my artist's DNA. Every artist, every person who makes things, brings something to it. You sit down, what are you bringing to it? You're a truck driver, you like to make pictures, what are you bringing? What are you bringing to it? Often, what you are bringing is resources that you don't even know were there.

Well, for me, I just continued doing what I did as a child. And that was very complicated because in 1949, when I found myself showing *Midwinter Painting* with Helen—no, Helen wasn't in that show. [01:40:08] *Midwinter Painting*, that picture that was in Meyer Schapiro's show—

AVIS BERMAN: That's the *New Talent* show, I think that's 1950 or so.

ALFRED LESLIE: Yeah, the first *New Talent* show. When that happened, all of a sudden I was acknowledged not only in my personal relationships, but to some degree as a person of consequence outside my personal relationships. Weldon Kees commented on my work in the *New Republic*, and almost all of the older artists who saw the work looked at me and there was a different dynamic in terms of what that picture stood for at that time in their eyes. Okay? Now, at that time, I found myself—all of a sudden, as I said—in a public space, and I didn't like it. I felt very uncomfortable in it. And I thought, "This is not good, to be here in this public space. It's better to be outside [laughs] and not have all of this focus on you because there's all of these demands made in areas that you're not interested in being a part of, or anything like that."

So I thought I didn't know how to deal with it. Because here I was, I was still making paintings, I was still writing, I was still shooting film, I was still writing songs, I was still writing stuff. I was doing all the things I had always done, and I couldn't support it financially. [01:42:13] Here I was, just making enough money to pay my rent and pay for my telephone. That was the way I lived. Everything else was marginal. "How do you get food?," all the rest. What counted was a telephone to be able to get a job, and to pay your rent to protect your work so you could have a place to sleep. That was it. So all of a sudden I said, "How am I going to—I can't carry this burden of doing all these things at the same time." So I decided, "All right, what you do is that you have to say, of all the things you do, what is the mother? [Laughs.] The mother dynamics of all of this?" And I said "Wow, this is really hard."

Painting. Everything I do as a painter involves everything I do in everything else. So what I have to do: get rid of your typewriter, get rid of your cameras, get rid of everything that you own that does not interfere with your painting. You are a painter, you will do nothing else. So I sold all of my photography equipment to a man named John Reed, who then opened up a camera store in Easthampton called John Reed Photography Store. That was there until John died and then his son kept the business. The one photograph that I have, at least the best photograph I have of myself, at Essex and Hester Street, was taken by John: me sitting like a serious artist in the chair, you know, in front of a window, sulking in a way. You know, one of those art-type pictures but quite an informative picture. [01:44:18]

So that was emptying myself of everything except the brush in my hand. But as soon as I emptied myself, what did I do? I began to fill myself back up again and as I began to fill myself back up again, I said, "You must not do it." But then I thought, "You are really doing something that you didn't expect to do. Maybe this is the path that you have to take. Maybe what you have to do is do all of these things at once, no matter what criticism is leveled at you, for whatever reason, just in order for you to be the artist that you are. You don't know where you're going—no one really knows where they're going—but maybe you have to let the things you make bring you into their care and you have to be able to deal with it." So I kept struggling with this until 1956.

By the time 1956 came along, I realized that those years between—those six years, five or six years—I had been secretly doing all of these things. I didn't want to do anything, but in 1952 and 1953, I did 16 stage sets. I did the first sets for the first English language version of *The Dybbuk*, around the corner on Fourth Street. [01:46:06] I designed the theater, I built all of the sets, I did two summers of—a summer of stock with Herbert Machiz. I did all these sets for Herbert Machiz and John Myers when I became a member of the Tibor de Nagy Gallery. I began to write again. All the things that I had banished came to fore.

In 1956, a man came to my studio, and he saw these small collages that I was making. I was selling them for \$100 apiece, and he came in and he said he wanted to buy 10 of them. He was a nice guy, he was the boyfriend of a woman that I knew. And I said, "I can't sell you 10." He said, "Hey, you have no money." I said, "Well, look, to me, to be selling a picture should go to a person who is going to invest in my future. That is to say, they're going to take that picture and they're going to think about it, and maybe they'll tell other people. So if you buy 10, I will lose a potential [laughs] nine other customers. It's too much for you." I said, "Plus, the fact is that I like you but you are in the bond market. You're in a different world. What are you going to do with these? And maybe you'll lose interest and I'll lose the works." To this day, the one that he bought—I only sold him one—I don't know where it is.

So he said, "I've never met an artist that talks like this." So I said, "Well, I don't know that I'm so special. To me, everybody is like this." [01:48:06] So he said, "Look, I want to give you as a gift"—and he had just made a lot of money in Polaroid stocks, and he gave me as a gift one of the earliest of the Polaroid cameras. And at that point, I began taking photographs again. And I started like a demon. It just was like a hunger fulfilled. I photographed everybody that came into

my studio. That little, wonderful—that first version, it made these beautiful, high-resolution pictures. It was stunning.

But what that goddamned camera did, it opened me up to filmmaking again. Now, my secret heart had been working separately during those years. Writing, planning. I would not acknowledge it publicly. And what I had been planning to do—I thought, "What you have to do is you have to create an organization to make film, a repertory theater. You now know the people who you work with in the theater, you now know lighting people and all of this. What you're going to do, you're going to create a film production company and you're going to make films. You're going to write them and direct them and you're going to do this whole big megillah," or whatever it was.

So that was on my mind, and that's when I started to make these Polaroids and began—out of the blue came my desire to make *The Hasty Papers*. Now, this was something in which, in terms of my view of myself, that I look now, in terms of self-examination, I had already decided, which I mentioned before, that I had to take all the risks of—no matter how destructive it may seem—is to follow this internal path. [01:50:27] What I was concerned about was that I was [laughs]—it may sound romantic—some kind of something that was there, that I did not know what it was yet. I did not know where I was going.

In some respects, I did know. And what I was trying to do, and that was the beginning of my vague understanding, was to reconcile all of these things together. How could I bring together the stories that I wrote and told to myself, the stories I made up of people that I saw on the street? I would see somebody walking down the street and they stumble, I come back and I say to Nancy, "You know, I saw something very"—and I would create this story about who the person is. So how do I bring together storytelling, painting, literature, writing? How do I bring it all together? And I decided I just had to keep doing all of them at the same time and let them choose what it was. I had to just give myself over to all these disciplines.

Immediately, the art world and I—in the so-called public face that I had at that point—came in conflict, because basically everything that I was standing for, which I thought was just for myself, was something that was [laughs] taking, quote, a position against disciplinary singularity. [01:52:20] I was going to be a multidisciplinary artist. I was going to—that's what I was doing. I immediately—and I think there's a record of what people said about me personally, what they said about my work. They said I was destructive—this, that, and the other—is an insane person. But I just did it. I just moved ahead and did what I thought I had to do to be an artist. I thought, "Well, are you going to define yourself like, say, a painter? Or are you going to define yourself as an artist, which has a larger breadth?" It's like a pulsing hand, you know, all these fingers. And when you're an artist, you have another kind of range of choices.

There was a sculptor from Los Angeles who said something very similar when I was reading something somewhere that I had read, that he had been talking about in an interview maybe. And he said, "Well, there was a point in time"—he said, "Listen, if you're going to do what you think you want to do and you don't know what you're going to do, you simply have to decide that you're not going to think any more as a painter, you're going to think as an artist." Again, it wasn't anything unique, what I was experiencing, but I think it was what you would call growth, growth of a particular sensibility in terms of all the things that were happening. [01:54:10]

But of course for me at the time, this was contrary to the public face and the way that people saw me. Because one of the things that happened—the people that I knew from the '40s and the '50s, the late '40s and the '50s, who knew me as a filmmaker—they had seen my films, they had heard this, they did this, they did that, but suddenly, there was another generation that had come in. They only knew me as a painter. So when I began to make films, make planning, the film structures that I had and *The Hasty Papers*, they didn't know what the fuck I was doing. And I became, in a political sense, just vulnerable to attack, and that's when there was the shift in the understanding of where I was going as an artist. I figured, "Well, eventually, someone will recognize the development of my work," but no one was interested. I didn't expect anybody to be interested until I was dead.

But recently, there was a guy named Ted Loos, and Ted came to interview me for something for the Frieze Art Fair, and Ted was the first person who actually said, "You know, these are things, blah, blah, blah," and he somehow saw and was able to position from a generation after the generation. Because, in its way, myself, Harry Jackson, Larry Rivers, Mike Goldberg, all of the artists that I was—Jane Frielicher—that I was identified with at the time were not college educated. [01:56:08] We may have gone to art school, we may have gone to a university, but we

were not the generation of Frank Stella and Carl Andre, and the people that came over. And they had another—they appeared to have, let's put it that way—they appeared to have another sense of things.

So for example, somebody sent me this recently, since I try to save things for my archive, because it's all part of the stuff that I have lost. Someone sent me a clip of something that Rubin, Bill Rubin?

AVIS BERMAN: Yeah.

ALFRED LESLIE: William Rubin. He wrote a book about Frank Stella and he said that the early works of Frank's were influenced by me and Rothko, which I thought was—how does he—well, I don't know Frank's early work. But then he said—what was it he said?—something about the person that Frank was really influenced by was Jasper Johns. Well, to me, I thought that was something of a reach.

I like Frank. I think Frank is a wonderful, wonderful artist, and I think he's wonderfully smart, and I love to hear Frank talk. When de Antonio did this interview with Frank for this film, *Painters Paintings*, and Frank just sat there on the floor and he just—he was like [laughs]—it was like there an invisible nut [ph] sucking all of his words and ideas out. [01:58:02] I love that, and I think he's a wonderful artist and I really admire this path that he's taken as a sculptor. But no one has ever acknowledged that when he stopped being a so-called Minimalist of that sort of classical rectangle, what did he do? He began making these sculptures [laughs] of Pollock's paintings, which is what a lot of people have been trying to do as to what Jackson had done, and turn it into another kind of—and that's the way that I see what Frank is doing.

So this new generation had their view. And it was their view that became the standard view of seeing what I had done as an artist and prevails to this day. Although occasionally now, a few people, one or two people, step forward and say, "Well, what about this, that, or the other thing? Why did this guy do this?" Because, for example, when I was making *Pull My Daisy*, none of the people who were making it, including Robert, really knew anything about filmmaking. People look at making films today, you pick up an i-camera [ph] or one of those little phones, and you point it and you push a button or something, and they're shooting a film. Well, mechanical film is a very different cup of tea, so when *Pull My Daisy* was made, no one understood that it was a structured film. They all saw it as what Robert seemed to see it as at the time, as a film in which, as he put it, that, "You just walk in there and you turn the camera on and you point it at the people who have run into the studio." Which is totally fucking insane! [02:00:06]

So I used to say to myself, doesn't anybody look at this film? Hardly any film could be more tightly structured, and sort of—what it is is pretty clear, but the voice, the various voices of people who were just beginning to understand the technology of the cinema, which at that time was still an isolated thing—so for example, when I made *The Last Clean Shirt*, I had no money at all, and I woke up in the middle of the night in a fever. And I was living with Lisa Bigelow at the time, still at 940 Broadway. And I remember immediately, I woke up in the middle of the night and I thought I was going to simply die. And I thought, "This is it, you're not going to be making this fucking film because you don't have any money. You don't have any money, how are you going to do it?" Well, I am a person which—I had begun to understand how I functioned finally. I get up in the morning, all I want to do is make things, that's all I've done. And if I'm thwarted in any way, it really is really, really hard for me. So for example, when my computer collapsed, I was lost. So here I was, I had this idea for a film and I wasn't going to do it.

With *Pull My Daisy*, the money came totally accidentally. Eby Kornfeld, the great Swiss something or other—curator, I guess Eby was. [02:02:02]

AVIS BERMAN: Or a publisher maybe, or something?

ALFRED LESLIE: Eby Kornfeld and Arnold Rüdinger came to my studio and brought a woman named Mrs. Geigy. She was my age, frail, a multi-quadrillionaire from Geigy Chemical Corporation. They brought her up to this shithole—

AVIS BERMAN: [Laughs.]

ALFRED LESLIE: —that I was living in on Fourth Avenue. I mean, it really was, you know—I mean, it really, really was a shithole. And she came in and Eby and Rüdinger said, "This is the painting we want you to buy." And so, just like that, she looked at it and she nodded her head "yes" and she gave me a check for \$1,000, and the painting is now at the Swiss Museum, Basel. I

don't even know if they hang it at all.

I got that painting and I had already done all the figuring for how to proceed on making what came to be called *Pull My Daisy*. I called Robert up and I said, "Look, I sold this painting and I've got \$1,000! We'll go out, we'll rent the camera and we'll start shooting the film tomorrow." So he said, "Well, I've got \$1,000," and so he put \$1,000. At that point in time, Walter Gutman, who was forever pursuing young girls in the art world, was sitting inside, and he said over the—I could hear him over the phone, he said, "Well, if Alfred, who has no money, and Robert, who has no money, put in \$1,000, I'll put in \$1,000." And all of a sudden, within a few minutes, there was \$3,000. [02:04:00] And then Walter went out and then got seven other people I think, business associates, and each one of them invested \$1,500 apiece, and all of a sudden there was \$15,000 dollars.

I don't know how we got into that, but anyway, that shows you how that was done and how it came apart. And the art world, how it was received, was pretty much in terms of my life and everything, as to, "What the fuck does this guy know about filmmaking? What does he know about a camera? What does he know about the theater?" These were people writing in the '60s, who knew [laughs] nothing about what I had been doing for the past 10 years, so they formed the matrix for all these things that were going on and that was—you know, that's how that misunderstanding, or whatever you want to call it—

AVIS BERMAN: But film writers, film critics, how did they see it? In the beginning? I mean, they must have—

ALFRED LESLIE: They loved the film.

AVIS BERMAN: Exactly, I mean—

ALFRED LESLIE: When I showed the film, when the film was shown the first time—what's his name?—this wonderful writer, he was—they were ecstatic. They said, "It is a beautiful film." It was a film that came out of an idea that I had about bringing together certain people into the same space, bringing them in and creating a structured environment for them to function in, and that was it. That's the way I perceived it.

AVIS BERMAN: Right, and certainly—I mean, they must have—it was certainly not improvisational in the least.

ALFRED LESLIE: Totally. But it was perceived as improvisational, unfortunately, because Robert liked to talk about it as, "I walk into the room and these people are sitting around, and I pick up the camera and I point it." [02:06:09] Well, unfortunately, nobody looked at the film and for years it was always this misperception of understanding how it was made, you know, and so that was that. But that was part of the culture of the moment, of that—me, being involved in something where I was not supposed to be. It was 1960.

So when I made *The Last Clean Shirt*, this was even more complicated. And what I did was—in order to be able to do it, I know that once I got the idea of how it had to be done, I managed it in a way that was all these chance, wonderful chance outlets. I needed to borrow a car, so I called this painter, Howard Kanovitz. And Howard lived around the corner, on Second Avenue, with his wife Mary. She had a bead store on Eighth Street. And I called Howie up, it was Sunday morning, and I said, "Listen, I would like to borrow a car from you, I think it would be great, your convertible. I have an idea for a film and I want to take the car for a test drive." He says, "Come over." So I went over, there was Mary behind the counter and Howie standing there, and I described to him and Mary, what my idea was to film.

During this time, three people came in, [laughs] two young women and a black man. [02:08:00] They're standing there listening like this, and when I'm through, one of the young women, who happened to be married to the black guy, Heikki—Heikki stepped forward and she was Scandinavian or whatever, she stepped forward, she said, "I would [laughs] love to be in your film." She had heard me describe what was going on, so I said, "Do you want to try it?" I said, "Howie's car is outside, I'll take you for a spin and see if you can do it." I said, "You have to be able to feel free in front of a camera and talk doubletalk in whatever your native language is." I forgot what it is now. Norwegian? I forget. So she gets out and I take a spin with her and she's not comfortable, and then we come back and she knows by the time we come back that it's not going to work.

So she goes back and she's very disappointed and she says, "You know, I can't do it but my

sister can do it." So her sister, in contrast to Heikki—Heikki is blonde, pert, outgoing—her sister is quiet. I mean, like this, a pulsating volcano of elements. You don't know what's there in this creature who is earning a living as a bank teller. So I said, "All right, Heikki, your sister"—I've forgotten her name—"Do you want to come out and try it?" She nods and she comes out and she is perfect. And I realized, "Oh, God, this is like stumbling on a creature which, if I were a French [laughs] filmmaker or something, I could turn her into a great star." [02:10:02] She is the most at ease and natural, she's like a female Henry Fonda, a creature who gives nothing in ordinary circumstances of life, but once in this other thing she's like this, she's just out, and that's how she was.

So when I came back I said, "All we need now is a driver." And Heikki's husband went, "I'll do it!"

AVIS BERMAN: [Laughs.]

ALFRED LESLIE: And he happened to be black. Now, I did not care whether there was a black man driving or a black woman talking, or vice versa. I didn't care if they were both white, I didn't care if they were both black, I didn't care if they were a mixture, I did not care. There weren't any political connotations to what I was doing. These were chance elements, and these chance elements were going to bring into things—into the film, which over time, would undergo the transformations that perceptions of varying people come after see, and they interpret it in another way.

So now some people are saying, "This is against women, because she talks and doesn't say anything intelligible," and then, "Oh, this is against black people because he doesn't talk at all, he's just sitting there." Well, when I got Frank involved, I shot the footage with this young woman and me sitting in the back with the guy who I was working with, operating the camera.

AVIS BERMAN: Frank?

ALFRED LESLIE: No, Frank O'Hara wrote the subtitles.

AVIS BERMAN: Okay, right.

ALFRED LESLIE: But I didn't have him write the subtitles, have him get involved in them, until I have the footage. [02:12:00] So the cameraman and I sat in the back, the couple sat in the front, they drove and I got the footage. I had it printed and it was—it really knocked my socks off.

In the meantime, I had met a wonderful, wonderful man, Tony Schwartz. And Tony Schwartz was the most extraordinary audio person. He was a sound archivist. Tony had issues about being aboveground, so he lived in a place belowground, like this. He never went aboveground and he wouldn't go in an elevator, anything like that, but he listened for sound and he went around. He has an archive of interviews with people that are in the Smithsonian, I believe. He would walk over to people and say, "What do you think of Abraham Lincoln?" So he said, "If you need any sound, I'm here." So he gave me sound that I wanted to implement: rain, thunder, all these kind of things that could bring in, into the film, which I thought were a necessity.

So when I had this cut done and I had it all shaped visually, and a print made, and I showed it to Frank, I called him up, I met him at the Cedar and I said, "This is my idea. I'm not going to tell you what to say but what I want is for you to write subtitles for what the woman is saying in the second print. And then, in the third one, I want you to write what the man is thinking. Whatever you want to write, it's you, and then we will print the subtitles on." [02:14:02] Frank saw it and he loved it, he got it immediately. And then he went and he wrote it and then I had to position all of the titles, because there are two ways of putting subtitles on a film at that time. I mean, this is mechanical film. One is that you go to a place like Tetris Sound, and then they make a little piece of type. They set type, which can be heated, and then you pay 25 cents for each title, and then they put the title, this special type in the machine, they take a print that's already been made, and then they roll it and then this heated piece of type—you say, "This type has got to go on for four and a half seconds," it burns the emulsion off of the film and the title is burned on, into the base of the film.

So the problem there was that it was 25 cents for each title. And Frank had written all of these titles that I couldn't afford. So what we decided to do was just to do the amount that we had and then later on, I'll get some more money and then we'll burn the later titles on in between. Because I wanted text to be on the film continuously. I didn't want such long gaps where you only look, because my idea was to create separate levels, what I thought are these levels of reading and the place where reading puts a view in with looking, which puts the viewer into

another place. And then when you take those two places and then put it into a theater, where a person has come to be entertained, and then all of a sudden the film opens with a title "edu," which I knew in 1964, stood for education. [02:16:27] Nobody else thought "edu." Now we think "edu" stands for something.

So then I got someone to sing that song, that wonderful song, and then the final thing was that I went to Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, who were friends of mine. Of course Jerry had married Gaby Rodgers, Gaby Leiber, Gaby Rosenberg, which is what her name was originally. I went up and I said, "I need a song for the end of the film," and we're standing in this big archive of all these things. And so Mike said, "Well, we have a song that the Animals just recorded, I don't know." I said, "What's the name of it?" And I never heard it. He said, "The Last Clean Shirt," [stamps feet] and I said, "That's perfect! That's what I'm going to call"—and without hearing it.

AVIS BERMAN: Oh, so that's how you got the title.

ALFRED LESLIE: That's right. And that's how I got the song. And it fit. Again, that's with chance, because to me where chance enters in and creates these opportunities that the viewer—being an unconscious element, which retranslates everything that you are showing them. You say "blah blah blah," and then Mr. X gets "blah blah blah," Mrs. Y gets "blah blah," everybody gets a different "blah blah blah," and the same "blah blah" is exploded into a different psychological continuity of language and understanding of ideas. And so the idea is: How, in a theatrical sense—when a film opens up, how do you get into the head of the viewer? How do you make the person in the theater be with you? [02:18:30] So what you do is you—they come in, they have their expectations, they want to be entertained.

So the first thing is—from my perspective, is for them to say, "What's going on here?" The minute they say, "What's going on here?" they're here. They're with you. And Howard Hawks, the same thing: You have to get the person sitting there into your magnifying glass of ideas and everything. So when I had this fake title "edu" film by, and then the song, "Once to every man and nation, comes a moment to decide, then it is the good man chooses"—and that hymn, I thought, "What a wonderful, mysterious mix." The meaning—I wasn't searching for specific meaning, but a layering of meaning, and the layering of meanings brings—the world of interpretation opens up and everybody who is going to see it differently anyway, those people come in and they see it and they bring life to it. And it's in that moment, when the person who is reading and watching—the person who is listening or whatever—enters into the film and then they are a part of it. [02:20:13] And they make their contribution.

Because just like when you make a painting—I made a painting once of a young woman who was a dancer at Mount Holyoke. A young woman, 17, 18 years old, asked if I would make a painting of her naked, doing a plié. So I love dance and I love—but I said, "That's the weirdest thing. So I made this painting of this young woman standing naked, doing a plié, with her hands open like that. When I finished the painting—it was a beautiful painting, but there was nothing—there was no there there. You know, it was like [laughs] Gertrude Stein: Where is it? What is that? There is that extra something that engages the interpretive powers of the viewer, to be able to bring what they have into the picture. So all of a sudden I said, "Well, what's missing? She just has her hands empty. I know what I'll do." So I put a hand coming in off the canvas on one side, on the other side, so now she's standing like this and another pair of hands are holding her hands, so she's what? You don't know what.

So I'm with Dick Bellamy and Barbara Flynn, who were at a show, of all my—a group of pictures, including this painting, in Florida. And as in many of these instances in small communities, 90 percent of the people there were women. And because there was so many pregnant pictures there, a lot of them loved them. A lot of women are made uncomfortable by pregnancy pictures. [02:22:04] So a lot of these women came in, and at one point this young woman came over and looked at this picture of this dancer and she said, "That's the story of my life." Well, [laughs] when I heard that I said, "God, what kind of gift has been brought to me?" [Laughs.] I said, "What's that?" And she said, "My father on one side, my husband on the other."

So now that is what I search for when I make a picture of people. I want to find some way—I don't know what particular way—to engage them, that brings them in. I know that once they are going to be brought in, they will bring in whatever they bring in, but bringing them in is exactly the thing that you have to be able to do. And that's what the picture was concluded. It was concluded in that way by that one thing. And that corresponds, as I say, to Howard Hawks saying, "You have to get inside of the head of the viewer and you have to make them ask what is happening." So when *The Last Clean Shirt* opens, "edu," the song, the thunder, the rain, all of it—

the first thing people are saying is, "What the fuck is going on?" And at that point they're looking. They don't have to know anything else. You've given them a bunch of ephemeral clues and then that takes them into it.

And basically, the way I did that is the way that I make all of these paintings. In these paintings that I'm doing, in which there are parts of , [aside] now that you see here, they have nothing really to do with the computer. [02:24:06] They have to do with the lives of people and opening up the territory of creating an image which engages the person so that they bring into it all the varieties of experience that they bring into it. But at the same time for me—whereas that's like a very important thing for me—in the end, the only important thing is the first thing, is that the formal qualities of the work come first. And I have to make a picture which has this whatever that brings it alive. And then when I do that, then the people who see it complete it.

AVIS BERMAN: We will get into these later, because we're going, you know—but I will only say for the tape is, you start looking at the portraits of these people and you cannot take your eyes off of them.

ALFRED LESLIE: Oh, thank you.

AVIS BERMAN: I mean, I have to because we're doing this, but they—I mean, it's kind of—some of them take me back to George Grosz—

ALFRED LESLIE: Oh, right, yes.

AVIS BERMAN: —in a certain way, or the street. But the life of people around—and there are young people and they're expressing themselves through costume and makeup and other things. But they really are—anyway, but they are absolutely compelling.

ALFRED LESLIE: Oh, thank you, I'm glad. You know, there is this show that I haven't heard anything of the responses about. The one thing that you can note about the pictures that one makes of people—there's one thing—you just have to make them and make them and make them and that's it. And then let go. You can never know what people think. You would like to be able to reach them. [02:26:00]

And as I said recently, when Barbara Rose said that I was a humanist and my wife said I was always putting myself in harm's way, and I realized that that's what I've been doing, it really came as a great shock to me because I never saw myself as this kind of a person. Never did. And here I am, 92, however old I am, and all of a sudden understanding what some of the most compelling motivations of my entire life have been.

And the structure of my life—when I showed you that picture of my father, and I looked at it the other day and I said, "This moment in my father's life, when he was thrown out of this life, his father disappears, he and his sister are put into an orphanage, this other son is kept by the mother, and he is isolated." I thought to myself, "This was a moment in which much of my internal life in a way was formulated. And whatever discipline that he had, who the fuck knows where he got it." I don't know why some people are disciplined or not. Why you do it, I have no idea.

But when people get up in the morning and they don't [inaudible], they say, "How can you do this?" Frankly, I am completely at—I don't know what to say. I mean, what else [laughs] are you going to do? Make money? Who the fuck wants to make money? I would like to make money in order to be able to pay for the things that I make. But it's a particular kind of, I guess, internal pressure that some people have and some people don't have. That was what I was talking about, this DNA that some of us, that some people are given. [02:28:19] And I'm not talking about it as being good or bad. There's no judgmental things about it. But it's just that some do and some don't.

I mean, I know that the discipline of getting into a fucking 45-, 50-ton truck that's 100 feet long, and driving for two days straight without sleep—that to me [laughs] is hard. That to me is hard, hard, and what's at the other end but people who shun you because you have not done this and you have not done that? That to me is the hard life. So for me, I've been blessed in being able to do what I want to do.

All of the truck drivers that I met who are long distance drivers—I was stunned when I drove with one of them when I was shipping a painting of mine in an oversized truck, when I was living in Massachusetts. I was shipping this painting that was for the Lyndon Johnson Museum and I didn't

want it to be rolled. And it was nine-feet-high, and almost all trucks are only eight-feet-high, so in order to have something nine-feet-high, you had to get what they called a low bed trailer, and that meant a super big truck.

So this guy and his wife—I'm living in Massachusetts—drive up. [02:30:00] He's got a cowboy hat on and the rest. His wife is just like, the same clothing, and when they are backing this huge truck, really big, on this narrow road in Massachusetts, it goes off [laughs] the side of the road a little bit, which is farmland, and it sinks in and he's stuck there. And then he has to hire somebody and they're my houseguests for four days. Two people who drive back and forth, across the United States, schlepping all of this stuff and have a ranch where they raise cattle.

And I thought, "This is to me like the quintessential affection that I have for those working-class pictures of the '40s, of Edward G. Robinson, the linemen, you know, trying to put out the oil fires, Humphrey Bogart, and all the rest of them." These were beautiful stories about an America—if we can get into this, there's no real reason to—but that has changed in this way which I think is really terrible. When I find that there are people who are not comfortable with sweeping their own floors or taking out their own garbage, I try to understand what has happened. Oh, I don't want to get into this, it's crazy. Anyway—

AVIS BERMAN: Well, listen, why don't we—maybe this is a place to stop for today and we'll go on.

ALFRED LESLIE: Sure, if you want to do more, fine with me.

AVIS BERMAN: Right.

ALFRED LESLIE: You're great, you listen to my babble.

AVIS BERMAN: No, it's terrific.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]