

From a tape recording made at Alex Katz' studio in New York

- J. This is something I've thought about. You're starting a picture and you have some theme or impulse to begin with—but then the minute you put something on the canvas, you have something else to reckon with and the first impulse is broken because now another factor is re-acting which is the material reality you have just established. As you proceed you have this conversation between what's there and what you initially thought you wanted—and I often wonder about the ethics of it.
- A. If you start with a certain proportioned canvas with a certain idea of subject matter—that to me is a very conscious thing and if you are going for a specific, that is conscious too. No picture ever

comes out anything like you thought it would, sometimes with sketches I find that they come fairly close, but you can control it in that you can wipe it down—that's the control you have—you can wipe it down. Throw it away—is that what you mean?

- J. I think there is some elusive thing that you feel. I was just wondering if it were possible to describe the initial moment. It seems a mute thing—like breaking through a mirror—when you actually make the first strokes. But it really is coming from something in your mind—it has a kind of unconscious life of its own.



Jane Freilicher :
Self Portrait 1963

- A. The whole process of working to me somehow is conscious—I mean in that if you want a drip, you overload a brush and if you want washes you don't start plastering and if you want to work it up with three coats, you put on three coats—one, two, three—and so somehow it seems that, although you might not know exactly what a picture will look like, you know what your technique is and that you control a controllable thing, isn't that it?
- J. Yes it is—but sometimes depending on the degree of definition of the initial impulse, you find you might start with heavy paint and

wipe it all off and get a strange result on the canvas which leads you into a kind of thin painting, for instance, and so your idea swerves back and forth on itself and often you forget the initial impetus, it dies but it keeps coming back in other paintings and you may never really get it. Yet it is the thing that gets you started many times only to be trampled upon. Perhaps its only function is as a trigger without any meaning except that it gets you to start a painting.

- A. That sounds like what an artist's fantasy is. You know you have



Alex Katz : *Passing*

a fantasy of something you are going to do and it never comes out and after a while you grow up and you try to make your fantasies on the next picture—you accept it as a painting and that is it. That's very much like what we are doing now—it's art talk.

- J. Making do?

- A. Yes—it's art talk, it's making do and it is talking about your conscious fantasies and really what the painting is, isn't that at all. It should be a little more than that anyway. But the other thing about controlling a painting—that varies with the painter.

- I try to control as much as I can, but that means there might be drips and splashes. A figure might end up on the side of the painting rather than the middle. That doesn't seem inconsistent.
- J. Do you ever find you have some sort of idea which is impossible to realise ... that is, you have to acknowledge it was an absolute mistake to begin with—and you have to settle for something quite different?
- A. When a thing goes that way, it's just very bad. Wiping down a canvas seems much harder than putting paint on it and much more tiring.
- J. What about seeing your own work? Do you find a great disparity in how your work looks to you after a certain length of time? Does it really alter a lot?
- A. Pictures are always changing—I change a little bit but I believe pictures keep changing. Some pictures are like fallen soufflés—they look great when they are wet and three weeks later they don't look so good any more. I think that's the picture's fault.
- J. Gee, that's a wonderful attitude. No reproaches.
- A. It doesn't make much difference how you keep going. If you do it out of egomania or out of blank, blank, blank, it doesn't really make much difference though other pictures seem good to you. I mean, if some one likes it you do, too. You want it to mean something but it doesn't really until someone looks at it and says—I like it... But the thing we started to talk about was the unconscious in painting and that is a big fascination for everyone. The automatic, somehow... “swinging automatic” or the “automatic with nature” and that's like another fantasy to me.
- J. You mean there is such a thing as the unconscious?
- A. Everyone paints out of the unconscious but I think this thing of saying—“I don't know what I am going to do next” and “this painting is going to be a journey”—all that seems kind of silly to me.
- J. One facet of the whole business of the unconscious is that the final result has a psychological overtone, which was not really the result of the technical means employed. A painting produces a certain effect like a play—it's either a comedy, or a drama—or like a person—it's pleasant or nasty etc. It's what they call in

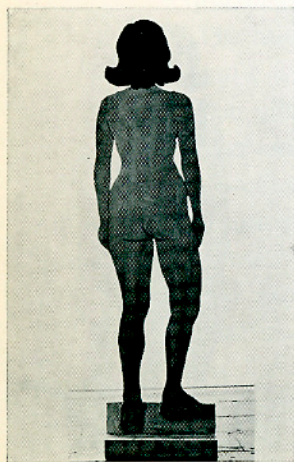
psychoanalysis, affect. That result must be produced by an unconscious intent to begin with.

- A. Yes, that part is marvelous.
- J. But also often this intention must go astray. The artist sees his picture one way and others see it differently which is disconcerting.
- A. Philip Pearlstein wrote, "The meanest thing in painting was an art of calculation," and I certainly agree. If a guy does exactly what he sets out to do, he has a calculated product and there is no room for...
- J. That's commercial art.
- A. You also get that as a fine art approach. When the guy works out a real didactic programme and makes it every time, and hasn't any depth—you can call it emotional depth or psychological dimension, etc., that is a thing all painting has to have. Mondrian stands because he had so much depth—on the human level.
- J. Do you try to make your paintings beautiful?
- A. Yes, I am a sucker for beauty.
- J. That's our trap. That's why we ain't making any money.
- A. But that's very hard to do. Do you paint from nature because it confuses you?



Alex Katz: *Maxine*

- J. It's that trigger I was talking about. The combination of forms and light in the landscape produces a rush of feeling which translates into the painting. When I have stopped painting on a landscape which is usually a motif seen through my studio window I go outside and I am always amazed by how much more is pouring over my head.
- A. Your paintings strike me as being very realistic and specific. In the landscapes you work mainly direct but when you work from the figure you sometimes work when the model is not there. Does that make you feel you've committed an immoral act?
- J. No, an act of necessity. When I work from the model I find myself going through all these contradictory "epiphanies." I get an illumination about the *real* feeling of the pose or the figure and not feel I ever get what I want.
- A. Would you say it's similar to doing a painting from many points at the same time and then having a painting from one point that's many points? I say that because it seems one of the theories that's considered radical in representational painting.
- J. I am trying for a kind of fluidity which will express the fact that an arm for instance seems to be in many positions at once, and that figure and background are not different. But I don't want to



consciously manipulate two-dimensional parts like in Cubism or a floating light like in Impressionism—or an intellectually imposed style.

- A. It becomes a difference of inflection. I think you are dealing with a much quicker light. You are working for an absolutely present tense in a time period. You take it from different angles at the same time. It's not like Cubism because it's a single image and not didactic. It's like Impressionism because everything opens up but then there is a quicker light, don't you think?
- J. What do you mean by a "quicker" light?
- A. The time period you are trying to represent seems like a much shorter one than in Impressionism. There's a longer time span and the light's slower in a Vuillard than in say a De Kooning. If you are thinking of an aesthetic you're starting with Pollock.
- J. You're referring to something like "immediacy" or "capturing the moment?"
- A. Yes, "capturing the moment"—"a quick light"—different people dealt with it in different ways and I think what you're involved with is part of that idea. And I think that's what makes it more difficult with the figure. It's kind of impossible to get it as quickly.
- J. Also it's harder to keep it spontaneous, which is something I depend on. I guess you do too but there seems to be a basic difference in our painting although I do think there is a common basis somewhere. You seem to have delimited an area for yourself and are very clear about it. You work within it and get the maximum expression within a fixed range. A sort of paradox occurs as a result because you have this almost "folk art" look crossed with a very knowledgeable frontal almost Egyptian style. It's like a blend of Herriman and Giotto. Is this just the way it happens or is it entirely conscious?
- A. It's about as conscious as I can make it. I believe in painting being conscious although you always have to leave some margin for intuition. The difference between us is that my work tends to be formal; what you might call "formalist" and the danger is that it gets a little stylised whereas yours tends to be a informal and the danger is it gets a little loose.

- J. If only we could get together—of course, what each of us is trying to do is to break into the other's territory because if you keep intensifying the method—if you expand form to its limits it breaks apart and—
- A. I'm trying to make a formalism that's alive and you are trying to make an informal style that has form. It gets kind of nightmarish when you think about it. But to get to your paintings being so realistic. They really convince me of looking like something and I am amazed by it. While, on a banal level, a calendar painting doesn't look real—it looks like a painting in a conventional style: a bad painting.
- J. I've painted this kind of subject for years and this particular view of Long Island many times. Towards the end of this summer I had done so many paintings of it I began to feel grim.
- A. I think that's one of the things you need for good painting. It has to go past the point of boredom.
- J. Yes, and back again.
- A. When it gets very boring, you have a chance of breaking into something that's kind of interesting. I think it's a healthy thing to start with something boring and continue and continue and continue, don't you?
- J. Yes, but it makes you want to drop dead sometimes. It's very bad for the temper. And while you're working very hard you hope it will pay off with a few easy paintings.
- A. Yeah, the dividend paintings. I think one of the things that's changed is that painting used to be fun and I don't find it fun anymore.
- J. You know, I had a dream last night in which I was reading a magazine in which there was a column headed by the French word "Reflets." It was written by François Mauriac and Fernand Léger and what followed was a recipe for an omelette. Which made me wake up thinking a bit about the French and French painting, all that glorious painting from say Delacroix to the first World War which seems like a material outpouring of pleasure—that kind of painting doesn't seem possible anymore. Do you think Americans are too puritanical?
- A. That's one of the things everyone has to make his peace with,



Jane Freilicher : *Rellining Nude* 1963



Alex Katz: *Lunch* 1963

that puritanism. If it's not partially grim it's somehow an immoral act. The thing that interests me is the difference between the early 50's when there was a sort of hedonistic quality of the minute being everything and now when everything seems to have shifted, and that way of working no longer seems enough to sustain one. And yet we resent the tediousness and the moral justification of tedious work to make a painting.

J. And the pains one takes are no justification or guarantee of anything—

A. The work doesn't mean anything and you have a conflict between Puritanism—in Work is Thy Salvation—and the Free Spirit and “Being.” But it seems to me that tedious painting is proper now.

J. Well, there's also the problem of keeping oneself interested in working. Just knocking off athletic, inspirational works seems rather boring just now, while ten years ago it was exciting.

A. It's mysterious how ideas and values in painting keep shifting and even the paintings you like. Vuillard and Watteau interested me a lot about three years ago but now I am more interested in Giotto.

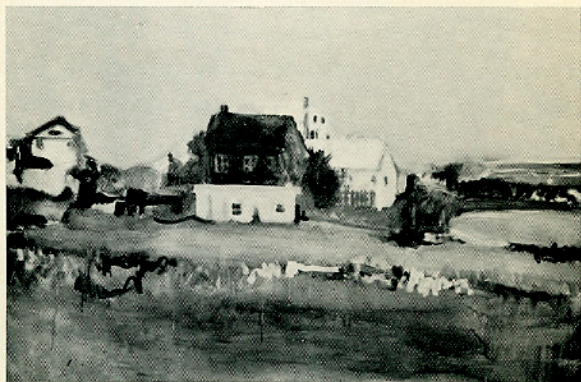
J. You know there is this whole aspect of the Old Masters: that real schmalz that's so delectable for human beings to look at. How do you get that lushness today without being a real cornball?

A. I guess you need the vitality of Pollock or the puritanism of Mondrian. But it does seem that the old masters are just as alive as new paintings. The whole idea of what is modern is pretty damn vague and “modernism” *per se* is a pretty romantic idea.

J. It does seem nowadays that every five minutes adds ten years to your life, but when you look back at painting of the past a hundred years' difference doesn't necessarily make a painting look older or less modern.

A. I guess styles changed just as rapidly as they do now—they were just as interested in style. Style is the very complicated business of being “now” inside a tradition. When painting becomes too radical, in other words, outside of the tradition, it just doesn't have much meaning. Anyone can make something that's “creative.”

- J. On the other hand there is the “dullness” of painting. I think it’s fatal to be “interesting,” but on the other hand—
- A. I think the big fear is to make something that doesn’t have any manners—
- J. —and yet not be boring.
- A. Part of the thing I’m involved in and you’re involved in is the denial of absolutes.
- J. I think I agree with you.
- As soon as I do something that seems very tenuous I get bored with it and when I get more and more specific I begin to feel sort of cloistered.



Jane Freilicher :
Burnett's Barn 1963

- A. It's good to have poles to bounce off rather than say: "This is what art is."
- J. You vacillate between opposing extremes...
- A. If subject matter has to be recognizable objects, I think it's like a transference—the paint becomes the subject matter or God becomes subject matter—anything—it's back to the painter's inspiration or his fantasy—it can be all kinds of nonsense—solar forces, electrical fields—it goes on and on into science fiction—all becomes subject matter. As valid and just as ridiculous as painting a tree. It's no more valid or any less ridiculous.