The following is an extract from the unpublished memoirs of Ilse Barker (AKA Kathrine Talbot) (1921-2006)

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13. A NEW WORLD

We had the good fortune to have an introduction into a ready-made group of people in Greenwich Village, then the bohemian quarter of Manhattan, who welcomed and helped us. They had known Kit's brother George during his various stays in New York, and the fact that some of them felt more hostility than friendship towards him did not greatly matter. Even if they welcomed us with complaints about George, he was someone who had added greatly to their lives, and they were glad to meet his brother. Also, some time had gone by - wounds had healed, and it was soon obvious to them that Kit was a very different kind of person: responsible and kind, less exciting, less intrusive and less dangerous.

The two friends of George's who owned the apartment on the Lower East Side we borrowed were John Farrelly and John Fitch. Farrelly was a writer, a reviewer for some of the literary magazines, an English graduate with many friends in the literary world. John Fitch had been in the Navy and had in fact visited the Barker family in London on one of his leaves. He was a racing driver and, when we knew him in our early New York days, a dealer in English cars, Morris Minors, then a prestige car, minute and startling in New York traffic. He ferried us about in his emerald green Minor that first evening, a nippy car in the crowded streets.

May was a bad time to arrive and look for work. College was out, and the typing jobs I counted on had been taken by students. Without experience of the American scene, I had (as usual) expected 'something to turn up.' People were helpful, trying to put me in touch with employers who might need my limited skills.

I particularly remember Virginia Admiral, a painter and one of the group in Greenwich Village whom we came to know. She worked for a typing agency and introduced me to her office manager. I had a test but wasn't fast enough, but I have always remembered her kindness.

What amazed me among the people we met at this time, a phenomenon new to me even among the bohemians of Soho and Cornwall (this was still 1949), were the women, the mothers of small children without men. They formed, I should imagine, a support group for each other and, seeing them all together, were therefore very visible to me. Some of the women had lovers who were not the fathers of the children, but all the women worked and brought up their children alone. I remember best a birthday party for our twin nephew and niece, George's children by his wife Jessica. They were probably eight that year, and since they lived in one room, the party was held in Virginia Admiral's apartment. Her son, young Bobby De Nero, was the same age as the Barker twins, a handsome little boy who was said to be 'difficult,' temperamental. Virginia was small and blond, her estranged husband Robert tall and dark, and he also was a painter, also struggling in the New York jungle. He was painting ties as a 'day job' (not an expression used at the time) and got Kit a place on the production line. The scene they painted was of palmtrees, possibly a tropical bird and a monkey, possibly a 'scantily clad' female. Everybody had one or two colours in front of them and painted in the necessary palmfrond or dot or beak before the tie was moved on to the next person. Kit did not last the week.

But this was a little later. In that first month, living on the Lower East Side, we were still trying to settle in and to find somewhere permanent to live. When I think how I sometimes worry (about what?), I am amazed that I cannot remember any desperate concern, sleepless nights in that foreign city among strangers. Our money was running out, I couldn't get a job, we had to find a place to live, but that was simply 'life.'

Kit probably worried, and he was certainly very homesick. He didn't say much, but I knew well enough that he missed England, home, family, all the familiar things. It must have been so much more strange to him than to me who had moved about more, who had had to acclimatise before. Also, New York was more like Continental Europe than England, and therefore less foreign to me. I remember that I felt his depression but could do nothing but encourage him to think of a better time ahead and a place to paint in - soon. And New York, even the run-down streets around us, was infinitely exciting.

We walked under the light-and-shade stripes of the Elevated Railway into Chinatown, we gaped at the Chinese telephone boxes like pagodas, the Chinese Restaurants with their strange writing - in neon. There were more neon signs flicking on and off in the narrowest alleyways than

in London's West End - all bars had their advertising lights, and beer, drink, could be bought in every grocery store. In the wider streets, Delancy was nearby, there were signs saying 'Flats Fixed,' and we wondered for a long time why painters and decorators, maybe plasterers and plumbers, should advertise on big boards. After a while somebody explained that the 'flats' weren't apartments but flat tyres.

When we walked in Times Square late one evening, the open shops, the things you could buy at nine or even eleven o'clock at night, were a wonder. I remember pointing out to Kit that one could buy nylons, even shoes and bags. In London in those years, the shops closed at 5.30 - and that was that. Out of milk? Bread? Too bad! Kit and I used sometimes to walk through the empty Sunday morning streets while we were staying with his parents during those early months of 1949, to a small shop in a side-street in Chelsea where one could buy milk and even tea, a longish walk, but a relief to find something the whole Barker family would otherwise have had to do without until Monday. On these occasions Kit recalled the 'brass cow' he remembered from the time when, a small boy, he was sent to a corner of one of the Kensington streets where, inserting a small coin, one could draw a pint of milk into a jug. Here in Times Square nothing ever seemed to close, and even on the Lower East Side, the grocery stores seemed permanently open for one's small needs and for the inhabitants to gossip in.

I remember noticing in the subway how clean people's clothes were. I had not realised how shabby and dirty England had become. Washing machines and laundrettes were still unknown there, and soap may very well still have been rationed. (In the Kensington kitchen, when Pa had gone off with the Ascot key, I washed up in lukewarm water, with the soap-ends, saved from original bars, kept in a wire-mesh container at the end of a handle which, when shaken in the hard water would create a few tentative suds.) Here the working people wore clean overalls and spotless white shirts. The 'dirty raincoat' was unknown.

When we went uptown to see the galleries and museums, we were bowled over by the paintings, the sculptures, the grandeur - the Museum of Modern Art took our breath away. I sometimes sat in the entrance hall there to save the admission fee, watching the people coming and going, or looked at books and postcards while Kit enjoyed the great paintings. But the private galleries were free, so many of them full of exciting work, and there was always the Durlacher

Gallery where Kit's drawings had been on show, and where the people who ran it had become friends.

Before the month was up, and we had to leave our friends' apartment, we had found a home to move to. One of the Greenwich Village group, a student of English Literature at Columbia University, had decided to give up his studies and move to California. 'Dropping out' was something new then, and his was a unique philosophical stance at the time. He was a precursor of the Beats, giving up the expected American pattern, going on the road west. He left us his apartment uptown in Puerto Rican Harlem, his knives and forks, his radio, his furniture and bedlinen, his curtains and some of his books. He spoke to the superintendent of the apartment-house, fixed a tip for her, and there we were with a home of our own.

Spanish Harlem, East 121st Street between Lexington and First, was just south of proper, black Harlem. The Puerto Ricans had moved in some years before. The language was Spanish. The superintendent of the building, a portly but not altogether amiable lady who spent much time on the stoop (we hated having to pass her, were always afraid we'd be thrown out) probably came from Eastern Europe. We must have seemed exotic to her. Yet on one side of our fifth floor walk-up apartment lived two rather grand ex-Swarthmore students, and we did not feel exotic.

It was hot that summer under the flat roof after the climb. Our front door led into a long, narrow passage, then the kitchen/bathroom was ahead, its bath covered with a lid, the lavatory in a cubicle. There was a room each side: the tiny bedroom to the left and the livingroom on the right. That room was big enough for a table and some chairs, and Kit managed to fix up a place to paint. The windows faced the back of an identical apartment block, and an elderly man there, retired or out of work, spent most of the summer sitting day and night at the open window drinking beer, lecturing and haranguing the neighbourhood on politics and religion.

On the opposite side to the Swarthmore girls (who became good friends and gave lively parties) lived a single man, a person I never caught sight of. It was said that he was a gangster and kept a dead body in his huge refrigerator. The refrigerator was a proven fact (we, of course, only had an icebox with a block of ice delivered by the iceman), since the company which owned it tried to repossess it for many weeks and months. All we ever knew of our neighbour was that he owned a 'phonograph' and one record which he played over and over on Sunday mornings. One side was 'Jo, Jo Di Maggio.' Our bed (single and widened by stacks of the complete works of Sir

Walter Scott and newspapers in lieu of a wider mattress) stood against that wall, and the record seemed to play right in our room or, after a night out, right in our head.

It was a long way down to the Village, but we went to the bars to meet our friends and occasionally babysat for our sister-in-law Jessica, George's wife and her twins. Abandoned by her husband, she had been helped by many of the Village writers and painters. We were told that Clem Greenberg had organised financial help for her when the babies were born, but by the time we arrived on the scene she was proudly independent, working in an office uptown, while the twins went to school with the nuns. She was a beautiful young woman with dark hair and finely chiselled features, but though devoutly Catholic she was unforgiving, and I found her difficult as much for my feelings of guilt (we didn't babysit very often) as for her hostility.

When we were in the Village we sometimes saw Clem who was good company, not especially goodlooking but sexy. I enjoyed dancing with him to the jukebox in the bars. He was beginning to be recognised as an influential critic and the champion of the emerging New York School of painters. This was already a cohesive and successful group. Kit got on well enough with Clem, but he did not like Clem's pugnaciously anti-European stance. Nothing but American art would do for him, and nothing but abstract art. Yet I remember that the only time we visited him in his Village apartment (on the far West Side, overlooking the Hudson docks, and, as I remember it, not in the usual brownstone house but a much newer, cementbuilt block), his painting on the easel, still 'not quite finished', was of fish on a plate. De Kooning was there with his wife Elaine, also Margaret Marshall, then the literary editor of the Nation. My memory paints a one-room apartment, the double-bed taking up much of the space. Presumably one ate in the kitchen. De Kooning and Elaine sat against the headboard of the bed.

While we had an introduction to William Baziotes and went to see him at his home, we met the rest of the New York Painters in the Village bars. All this was very new to us. When standing at the bar, we were told not to pick up our change but to let it lie in front of us, and the rule was to leave a small tip. But I remember also sitting around tables, and I fear I did not contribute greatly to the conversation. What struck me most after a few such evenings (we also attended lectures followed by informal get-togethers at a downtown arts club) was the painters' lack of interest in anything but their own art, the gallery scene and gossip. Literature, music and European art did not appear to exist for them. I was repelled by their competitiveness. In London, successful painters

tended to help others, shared inside knowledge of galleries, 'put in a good word.' I came away with the impression that they had begun to climb the ladder of success, and while they were happy to mix and talk with the other climbers, those not engaged in the ascent were of no interest to them. The only painter of this group who was at all friendly was Jimmy Ernst. He came up to 121st Street and had a drink and some food with us, and he later invited us back to his mid-town apartment to a party with dancing, a bar and a bar-tender (which amazed us), where we met all the painters and sculptors who became so successful in the following years - except Jackson Pollock.

Kit, in the meantime, was painting hard in our 121st Street apartment. I remember that he was still painting fish (if not fishermen). One canvas of a fish in particular is still very clear in my mind: a roundbodied flat fish like a plaice, it was painted in pale but luminous colours. It had some kind of texture (sand?), and I liked it very much. The other piece of 1949 I remember vividly was a big painting in oils on board called 'Sea Through The Spectacles.' Already tending towards the abstract, the spectacles were distorted, filling the canvas, the sea was seen through the two irregularly angular lenses, the whole in pale greys and blues, the spectacles dark grey and black.

I had found work in an advertising agency. The department was called 'Media Typing,' and I had to type schedules for radio transmissions and newspaper advertisements. It was laborious and very boring. I had a typewriter with a long and heavy carriage, and the schedules of names of cities, newspapers and radio channels, dates and numbers had to be typed into printed columns. They were chiefly for William Morris cigarettes and Procter & Gamble cleaning products. The latter were radio soap operas scheduled every day on many channels. I don't think I was a very good typist, and the number of carbon copies required made it a great trial. For this was a time before photo-copying and word processors, and even such large advertising agencies had no electric typewriters yet. I can imagine that the great number of typists have long been replaced by a very few 'machines.'

We sat at rows and rows of desks in a large low-ceilinged airconditioned and windowless hall. The surrounding corridor led into small cubicles where our bosses, supervisors and managers worked, also without windows. Only at the corners of the building were there larger offices with windows where the bosses' bosses had their being behind large desks. Though I am sure I was neither very fast nor very accurate, I was probably more educated, possibly more experienced than the rest of the girls and was soon put in charge of them. This gave me more responsibility but no

more money! When, the following spring, Kit and I were invited to spend two months at Yaddo to do our own work, I was given leave of absence, so didn't lose my job. The girls requisitioned various items from the stores (our supervisor looked the other way), and I was presented with a gift-wrapped present of typing paper, carbons, paper-clips etc. Nothing could have been more welcome.

I got on well with the girls who were friendly and, though they must have thought me strange, may have enjoyed a vicarious 'otherness.' The only time we had words was when I commented unfavourably on a friend having a baby. I understood that many of them were good Catholics (St. Patrick's Cathedral was right opposite, and they were allowed to go across the road on Saints Days), and their devotion to the family was apparent. That I said firmly I didn't approve of babies, didn't want any children, created bad feeling.

Their lives in Queens and in the Bronx were a mystery to me. They had boyfriends without having lost their virginity and put their photos or photos of filmstars under the glass tops of their desks. I was unselfconscious enough to have a newspaper clipping of Gerard Manley Hopkins' 'No worst, there is none,' under the glass beside my typewriter.

They were censorious about my wardrobe which consisted of two dresses (in autumn and winter a skirt and two shirts) which I wore on alternate weeks, one going to the laundrette. The other girls wore something different and newly laundered every day, and were surprised to see me in the same dress day after day. I wouldn't have noticed their disapproval if they hadn't mentioned it. We earned $45 a week, but while they lived with their families, I was earning for two. Our rent was only $21 a month, but my pay had to cover our food and other household expenses (one couldn't live without ice in the summer - was it 25c a piece?), my fares and Kit's painting materials. When we had a day out or went to see our friends, we had to pay for the subway (a dime?) and the entrance fee if we went to a museum. We sometimes took the Staten Island ferry (a dime too?) for the coolness on the water and the lovely view of Manhattan. Another favourite was the Bronx Zoo, where we could spend the day free of charge in a vast park where many animals were kept behind wide ditches and not in cages, clever landscaping creating the illusion that predator and prey were living freely in their natural surroundings. We took a sandwich, but when we were in town we sometimes shared a Woolworth sandwich and, for a treat, shared an ice-cream soda.

I pawned my mother's diamond ring that summer (I got it back - I still wear it) and was astonished that the pawnshop was like a grand bank, brilliantly lit up, with a long counter and all the paraphernalia of duplicate forms. It was a far cry from 'Uncle' in the Kings Road where the ring was later to spend the occasional six months, a dark shop with separate cubicles to save the customers from prying eyes. We also borrowed $10 from my cousin Ernest. Kit put it in his wallet and, as we walked back to 121st Street in the summer heat, the jacket over his arm, the wallet fell out of the pocket. It was a blow. My job was only just about to start, and I had to repay the employment agency fee. We survived. Some weeks later we had a letter from the Kensington police, telling us that the wallet (with its $10) had been handed in at the Harlem police station. Finding the Kensington address, someone had written to the police there. We retrieved it that day, delighted that in such a poor neighbourhood somebody should be so honest.

It was during our first winter in New York, settled into our frugal life on 121st Street, that we read in the Sunday paper about a place called Yaddo where writers and painters, composers and sculptors could spend time, and work in peace without payment or any demands made on them. We had made new writer and painter friends in the city, and they knew of Yaddo and introduced us to others who had been there, encouraged us to apply. It sounded unlikely, but then it was the unlikely, the magically helpful which we had in a way expected from the New World.

We had three separate stays at Yaddo before our return to England three years later, each different and helpful, and though I wrote most of my first published novel during the second, four-months stay in the winter of 1950/51 when Kit prepared for his one-man exhibition in New York, it was the first May/June stay in 1950 which set me on the road to publication, made it possible for me to plan a full-length novel and, writing one third of it, have it accepted by a publisher, thus paving the way for further invitations to Yaddo.

While I think back with pleasure and nostalgia to that first happiness in the cottage in Cornwall, there is no doubt that Yaddo was my true Eden, even though there were others later. Arriving at Yaddo in April 1950, the impact (after the rigours of 121st Street, living on $45 a week and the constraints of 'Media Typing') of the extraordinary, extravagant, Yaddo Mansion with its Tiffany lamps, oil paintings and 19th century furniture, its large rooms and beautiful parkland, lakes and rose garden, my study and Kit's studio, our bedroom with its big bathroom, the luxury of being looked after and the plentiful and delicious food provided a wonderful shock. Suddenly I

was free of the straightjacket of everyday work, even of housework and cooking, and even now it strikes me as extraordinary that I was able, though I had made no plans, had no plot in my mind, to settle down after two days' consideration to write a tightly plotted novel.

I still find it difficult, after all these years, to write soberly of Yaddo. People have written and spoken of it judiciously, there have even been complaints that the food is not as good as it was and other grumbles. Even Kit did not find it so easy to adapt that first time when there was a 'summer group' - thirty or forty people spread around the estate: in the Mansion, West House and smaller houses as well as individual studio/living spaces. He felt himself overlooked in the studio and, always shy, felt crowded by the group. But by the time we went back the following November (1950), he had become used to the place itself and, with a small winter group, and a studio/house of our own, found it as good for work as I did, producing a large body of work, much of it exhibited in New York at the Weyhe Gallery in January 1951.

Time has passed and, I am told, even Yaddo has changed. Indeed when we were there we heard of earlier years, when everything was 'even better.' How could it have been, I hear myself say, satisfied that 'our time' was surely the best.

The Foundation of Yaddo was set up by Katrina Trask, then owner of the estate, earlier in the century, after her husband and her four children had died. I have always thought of her as a romantic figure, a little absurd. No doubt she appeared larger than life to herself (even her full-length life-size portrait made her look a tall lady, while group photographs showed her small and a little rotund). And if she saw herself as a tragic figure, that was true enough, with her children all dying young (a baby drowned in one of the fountains). She was certainly serious about her work - however sentimental and out of date it now seems to us. She wrote poetry and plays, and it was her fellow-feeling for writers and her hospitality to many of them which made her devise this 'place for writers and painters to stay and work' undisturbed by the noise of the city, the demands of family and of earning their living. Here, everything would be free, peaceful and ordered for their convenience. When, after her death, it was set up, and as time went on and the needs and wishes of its temporary inhabitants were understood, a routine was worked out which seemed to me the epitome of convenience and good sense.

After a communal breakfast (after all, one doesn't have to talk or sit near other people), one picked up one's lunchpail and retired to one's workplace. Peace reigned! At lunchtime one could,

in the summer, take one's lunch on to a lawn, into the rosegarden or sit beside one of the lakes among the trees- alone or in company. In the house, visiting was not encouraged. At four this ban was lifted, and there was then transport into Saratoga Springs for shopping or the library, though the handsome turn-of-the century Spa town was also close enough to walk to then or later in the evening to have a drink or to go to a movie. When Kit and I lived in a small studio/house the following winter, we had open house for tea after four, and people came to drink tea and discuss the news, one's plans, other guests or the day's work, last night's movie, or one's personal affairs.

Dinner at night was communal, often lively, with much talk among the big summer or the small winter group. Afterwards there were excursions into the town or get-togethers round the pinpong table, card games and other amusements.

Nowadays we have television. But in those days it was difficult to find a proper relaxation after a day's hard work on a book. One doesn't want to read (other people's work... oh no!), one needs company and the exchange of ideas, and this was perfectly provided. (As it would be in the pubs at home.) Amongst the summer group there were always people to play the piano, to sing, sketches and skits were devised, we all laughed a great deal. In the winter we became passionate pinpong players, getting the stiffness of sitting at a typewriter out of our joints.

Because there was no 'means test,' because Yaddo was for the successful as well as for the struggling, the group was a comfortable mixture of young and beginning writers painters and composers and those already well-known and affluent, academics who had left their families to seek peace for their latest book, painters who were interrupting teaching-careers to prepare for an exhibition. There were therefore people there who could afford the gallon-jars of Californian wine and even bottles of gin and whisky to help in the evenings' conviviality and relax the mental tensions as the pingpong relaxed the muscles. It was also encouraging and inspiring for people who were just starting out to mix with those who had the experience and expertise of many books behind them, and who would discuss theory and practice, as well as 'knowing the ropes' of publishers and galleries.

It must have rained, and we certainly experienced a hurricane. There was lots of snow that winter. But I remember the place in the perpetual sunshine of my mood of happiness and work. I see myself walking the beautiful woodland paths on a soft carpet of needles, plotting the next

chapter, or in deep conversation with Kit or one of our new friends, discussing their next project, learning from their experience and thinking of their problems as well as my own.